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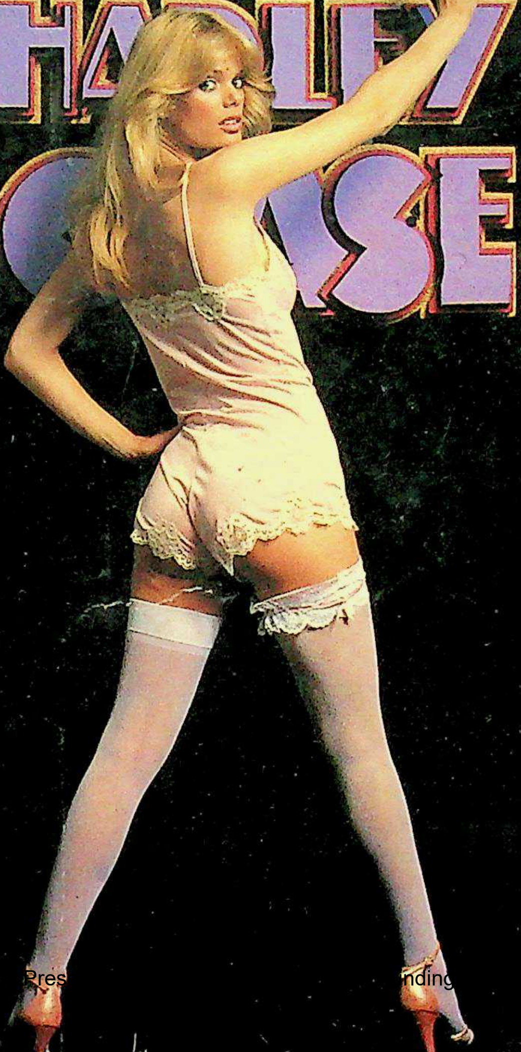
LADY — HERE'S YOUR WREATH

JAMES HADLEY CHASE



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It was Larry Richmond who'd been murdered–and he was the President of the Mackenzie Fabric Corporation. Many big names were shareholders in the business, including the Commissioner of Police. The boys from the Press had been told to lay off investigations–the word was that the Corporation was a blind for something much bigger . . .

Small wonder then that when Nick Mason began asking questions about the frame-up of Vessi for Richmond's murder, he started a lot of trouble–and when he wanted to quit, it was too late . . .

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Also by James Hadley Chase

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James Hadley Chase

Lady here's your Wreath

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*For SYLVIA who corrected the proofs,
suffers neglect in silence, and has none
of the glory.*

CHAPTER ONE

THE boys, who had come to see Vessi die, were lined up before the bar. They were putting up a good front, but they were all scared sick.

I came into the bar just when the liquor was hitting them. When they saw me, they let out a groan.

'For Gawd's sake, look who's here,' Barry shouted. 'The nine days' sensation himself.'

Barry Hughson was a good guy, but he'd got plenty of gristle mixed up with his brains. I just called for a rye and gave them a grin. 'H'yah, boys,' I said, waving my hand. 'I bet some of you're goin' to change your tune mighty soon.'

They didn't like that crack, and gathered round looking tough. Hughson poked me in the chest with his forefinger. That's a thing I love. Some guy poking me in the chest. Barry was tight, so I let it slide.

'Listen, Bud,' he said, screwing up his eyes to get my face in focus, 'this little business is by invitation only. You don't stand a chance. Be a nice lad an' scram.'

I belted the rye and showed him my card. 'You boys ain't the only guys,' I said. 'I'm with you all the way.'

Hackenschmidt of the *Globe* pushed his hat to the back of his head. 'How d'you pull these quick ones?' he asked, his fat face looking like a startled Dutch cheese. 'You ain't got any standin' around here, but you're always in on the right things.'

I nodded. 'I know,' I said, 'it's tough, but there it is . . . better to be early than late, as the airline hostess said to the passenger.'

Hughson filled his glass. He looked at the clock. 'Deadline 12:01,' he said.

Hackenschmidt grabbed a handful of drinking-straws and broke them in two; discarded one lot and carefully counted the rest. I watched him thoughtfully. 'You've left me out,' I said, after he was through.

The guy lifted his thick lip. It was his idea of a sneer. 'Yeah?' he said. 'I guess you ain't in this.'

I leant forward and picked up a straw. 'Put it in the bundle and don't be a punk,' I said, offering it to him.

He looked at me, and I looked at him. Then he took the straw. Some of these flabby guys think they're tough. Hackenschmidt was just punk, right through.

One of the straws was a lot shorter than the others. The guy who drew the short one got Vessi's last words. I wanted the job bad.

Hughson pulled the first straw, but he didn't get the short one. I let three more have a go, then I shoved a little, and the other guys gave way. I knew the short one, so I got it.

The others stood around, glaring at me.

'You gotta play ball,' Hughson said. 'Don't start anythin' that ain't on the level.'

I tossed the straw away. 'You'll get it all,' I said. 'Don't you worry.'

The time was 11:20. Just time for a couple more drinks. Those guys belted their rye like they expected to die themselves.

Outside, we crowded into three cars that were waiting to take us to the prison. Hughson, Hackenschmidt and I, with two other guys, got in the first car. Hughson drove and I sat beside him.

When he'd got the car moving, he said: 'Why the interest, Nick?'

I grinned in the darkness. Hughson was a cagey bird, but he wasn't getting anything from me. 'Why not?' I asked him. 'Vessi made a big noise, didn't he? I thought I'd see him go. Anyway, this gas stunt's a new one on me.'

Hughson swung the car past an overloaded truck.

'Not much you miss, is there?'

I shrugged. 'I get by.'

'Think Vessi did it?'

I grinned again. 'Don't you?'

Hughson swore softly: 'Listen, you bum, if there's anything behind this, let me have it. I've done things for you, an' I guess—'

'Skip it,' I said shortly. 'How the hell do I know whether he did it or not? The jury pinned it on him, didn't they?'

'I ain't interested in what the jury thought. I'm askin' what you think.'

'I never think, brother,' I said hastily. 'I just wait until somethin' happens.'

Hughson snorted. 'Okay, smart guy,' he said. 'Wait until you want somethin'.'

We reached the prison at 11:40. There were some other witnesses waiting outside the gates as we drove up. They all looked uneasy in the dim light, and moved a little way away as we came tumbling out of the cars. We stood there in a bunch, pretending we didn't know what we were there for, until the gates were opened at 11:45.

A couple of bulls inspected our cards and gave us a quick frisk. Since the Snyder execution the authorities were scared sick that another guy would smuggle in a camera. The boys knew it was pretty useless to try, and the cops knew they knew it, so the frisk was really just a matter of form. When they got through, we started through a maze of gates, each of which was locked behind us before we could pass through the next.

We marched single file, and I guess we looked a fine bunch of professional mourners. We went past the big cell buildings, our footsteps resounding on the walk. It was dark and silent in the cells. The death house was over in the far corner of the immense prison yard.

We walked round the hearse, parked in front of the death house, and a number of us just took one quick look at that wagon and tucked in our tails.

The death house had two entrances. One led to a narrow passage between the death chamber and wall of the death house. The other led to the little cell where Vessi was – a few feet from the entrance.

There was no other building near the death house. It stood alone in a corner of the yard, where the convicts played their ball game. As we shuffled across the yard the dust got on to our shoes and we took it into the death house with us.

The guard stopped at the entrance. 'Who's the guy for the last words?'

I stepped out of the file and jerked my thumb.

'Okay,' he said. 'You wait here.'

The rest of the guys trooped down the passage and grouped themselves before the glass windows of the gas chamber.

Hughson was the last one to take up a position. He said to me, as he passed: 'Watch yourself, Bud.'

I was surprised that a grin didn't come easy. This business was getting me a little nervy.

The gas chamber was octagonal in shape and made of steel, with windows on all sides. The narrow passage where the other boys had gone was built to allow four feet of space between the wall of the death house and the chamber. There was a very high steel chimney from the chamber up through the death house, to carry off the fumes once the execution was over.

I had a little more space on my side. I looked into the chamber. It was about five feet wide, and empty except for a steel chair, equipped with straps, standing in the centre. The cyanide 'eggs' were suspended from the bottom of the chair. I didn't like the look of this spot. It gave me the heebies just to imagine myself sitting in there.

From where I stood, I could look through the window of the chamber and see the boys on the opposite side, looking through their window at me. They waved at me and I gave them the two-digit high sign. Those guys certainly looked a bunch of monkeys massed up behind the glass.

I had come to see Vessi, so I thought I might as well have a look at him. He was sitting in his cell, smoking a cigarette. He was naked but for a pair of underwear shorts.

I looked at the guard. 'What's the idea – him like that?'

The guard glanced in at the cell. 'We always strip 'em down as far as we can. The gas sticks to clothes and it makes it difficult for us to get 'em out.'

'There's goin' to be a mighty rush for tickets when they put a dame in there,' I said.

The guard made a grimace. I guess he wasn't feeling too good. 'Yeah,' he said, 'but they'll keep you bums outta here.'

Vessi was a big guy, with a sullen, heavy face. Considering what was coming to him, I thought he was taking it pretty well. There was a glassy look in his eyes, and he was looking glum, but he wasn't in a panic.

The chaplain, a short, fat, worried-looking guy, sat on a chair, his head lowered, intoning a prayer. Vessi looked at him every now and then and licked his lips. I could see he wished the chaplain would stop the intoning.

I felt a sudden shiver run through me, as if it had turned cold. But it hadn't. I was sweating. The warden came down the passage quickly. There was a greenish pallor on his face, and he didn't look at me.

He just said 'Okay' to the guard.

They unlocked the door to the little cell. Vessi's skin tightened, and he looked behind the guards at me. I didn't like meeting that guy's eye, but I thought maybe I'd better give him a little encouragement. I winked at him. It was a hell of a thing to do, but I just had to tell him I was feeling for him.

The guard tapped him on the shoulder, and he stood up. He was steadier on his feet than I was.

The chaplain droned on. I could guess how Vessi felt about it. I had to hold myself in. Those prayers didn't seem to be getting us anywhere.

Vessi came out of the cell. He was handcuffed, and he kept twisting his wrists, fidgeting with the bracelets.

The warden read the death-warrant in a sombre, get-it-over sort of voice. I could see a trickle of sweat running down behind his ear. When he was through he said: 'Any last words?'

This was what I'd been waiting for. I moved forward so that I was close to Vessi. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the other guys pressed against the glass window, taking it all in, and watching me closely. Vessi looked right at me. 'You got the wrong guy,' he said, his voice not quite steady. 'I didn't do it.'

The guards closed round him, but Vessi suddenly stiffened. He continued to look at me. 'Break it open, Mason,' he said in a low mumble. 'Lu Spencer pulled it. You gotta get him – it was Lu – do you hear—?'

The guards bustled him and he was shoved into the chamber. I made a note to please the boys, but I left the last angle out.

They put Vessi in the steel chair with the pellets under it. The straps were tightened. While this was going on – it took under forty-five seconds – he kept his eyes on my face. I nodded to him, trying to tell him I was going to do something about it. He saw he'd got my attention and relaxed in the chair.

A guard brought a crock of sulphuric acid and put it under the chair – directly under the pellets. Then he took it on the lam quick. The warden inspected the straps – one around Vessi's chest, two on each arm, and one on each leg. He put his hand on Vessi's shoulder. 'You'll go quick, boy,' he said. 'Take a deep breath – you won't know anythin' about it.' Then he walked out of the chamber.

Vessi was in there alone.

The guard swung the heavy steel door shut, and shoved home the bolts. I and the warden stood looking into the chamber through the little window by the door. Ten seconds to wait, and those ten seconds seemed like ten years. I felt my heart bumping.

Vessi turned his head slowly, looking at the faces watching him. He was beginning to realize what was coming to him.

The warden had his eye on his watch. He reached out and put his hand on the lever which dropped the pellets into the acid. I could see him screwing up his will to pull that lever, and I was glad he had to do it and not me. I couldn't look at Vessi any more. I found my eyes on the warden's hand. I could see his muscles gradually tightening. Then with a little sigh, that came through his clenched teeth in a hiss, he jerked the lever down. The pellets dropped into the crock with a distinct flop. Vessi heard it and stiffened in his chair. A white gas began to drift from the acid. I could see the muscles of his arms suddenly bulge as he strained on the straps.

The gas rose rapidly. I thought I could taste bitter almonds – but I knew that was cock-eyed. My imagination was getting the better of me.

Vessi smelt the gas. He tossed his head back, twisting to escape the fumes. The steel chair held him. I could see him holding his breath. This guy was making it bad for himself. Finally he couldn't hold it any longer, and he gasped. He got a big dose of the gas that time. He screamed suddenly. The sound of his yell rattled round the chamber. It came to us muffled and eerie.

I found myself gripping on to the steel bolt of the door. This was getting me in the guts.

Vessi choked, gasped and writhed against his bonds.

The doctor at my elbow kept one eye on a stop-watch. Thirty seconds – thirty-five – Vessi still choked. Forty-five seconds and his head dropped back. The doctor scribbled the time opposite a blank on the sheet before him. Vessi seemed unconscious.

His head was back, and he had stopped coughing. The fumes filled the chamber. Slowly, very slowly, his head came forward.

Gradually it dropped between his shoulders, his long, black hair fell across his eyes. I could see his stomach muscles were still contracting. Three minutes had gone past. With a little shake his head came up a bit.

The doctor said, in a low, bored voice: 'He's dead.'

I stepped away from the window. Hughson came rushing round from the other side of the chamber, followed by the mob. They all looked pop-eyed and slightly sick. I felt that way myself. It took Vessi four minutes and a bit to die.

'What did he say?' Hughson demanded.

I shrugged. 'He said, "You got the wrong guy, I didn't do it".'

'Yeah?' Hackenschmidt sneered. 'That's been his yap right through the trial.'

Hughson was looking at me suspiciously. 'Did he say anythin' else?'

I shook my head. 'No . . . just that.'

They made a dive to get out. There was an immediate scramble for 'phones and the telegraph office. I let the rush get on ahead, then I turned to follow.

The warden touched my arm. He was trying to look casual. 'I shouldn't pin too much to the Spencer angle,' he said.

I paused and looked at him, but he was wearing a dead pan.

'You don't think so?' I said hopefully.

He shook his head. 'I should forget all about it.'

I pushed my hat a little over my eyes. 'Did you hear the one about the guy with a wooden leg, playin' ping-pong . . .?'

The warden nodded his head. 'Yeah,' he said, 'it's got round to me.'

I edged towards the exit. 'I guessed maybe it had,' I said, and left him.

CHAPTER TWO

I WENT over to the press-room at Police Headquarters. There was one guy I wanted to talk to, and I was hoping he'd be there. He was.

I pushed open the door and looked around the smoke-laden room. Four of the usual mob were playing cards round a small table in the centre of the room. I just gave them a quick glance and looked further. Over in the corner, on a battered couch, Ackie was sleeping.

Ackie was the ugliest guy I'd ever seen. He was a little runt, with coarse hair growing out of his ears, his nose and out of his collar. His face must have given the midwife a series of nightmares when he was born, but I knew he was about the smartest press man on the beat.

I wandered over to him and pulled up a chair. Then I shook him awake.

When he saw me, he sat up and glared. 'You're a sweet pal,' he said. 'Can't you let me snatch some sleep?'

'Aw, forget it, Mo,' I said. 'Sit down. I want to talk to you.'

Ackie rubbed his face hard with his hand, pushing his rubbery nose to the most extraordinary angles.

I took out a packet of Camels, gave him one and lit up myself. 'What is it, you bum?' he demanded. 'I bet you want to pick my brains again.'

I shook my head. 'You ain't got brains,' I said. 'You just think you have.'

Ackie shut his eyes. 'They fixed Vessi tonight,' he said.

'Yeah,' I said, surprised.

'What made you turn up?' he asked, without opening his eyes.

'How the hell did you know I turned up?' I demanded.

When Ackie smiled he looked horrible. I shifted my eyes. 'Not much I don't hear,' he said. 'What made you turn up?'

'Listen, Mo,' I said patiently; 'I came here to ask you somethin', not you to ask me.'

He lifted one hooded lid and squinted at me. 'Why the interest, brother? Somethin' hangin' to it?'

These news-hawks were all the same. I dragged down some smoke and held it for a second, then let it drift down my nostril. 'I don't think Vessi did it,' I said, keeping my voice low.

Ackie groaned and shut his eye. 'He's dead now, ain't he? Forget it.'

'This guy Richmond,' I said, selecting my words, 'I guess he had more enemies than Vessi?'

'Yeah, he'd more enemies than most guys. Richmond was a heel. He had it comin' to him.'

'There was a woman hangin' to the killin', wasn't there? They never turned her up.'

Ackie lifted his shoulders. 'There were hundreds of women,' he said indifferently. 'That guy had women in his hair all day long.'

'Who was she?' I asked softly.

Ackie raised his head. 'Nothin' doin',' he said. 'Richmond's dead an' Vessi's dead; both those guys were rats. It's washed up . . . forget it.'

'Why the hell should everyone want to play this business down?'

Ackie grinned a little. 'Do they?' he said.

'Now listen, Mo,' I said. 'There's somethin' you know an' somethin' I know. Suppose we go round to my place an' talk about it?'

Ackie shook his head. 'Just as soon as you get out of here I'm goin' to sleep,' he said firmly.

I shrugged. 'There's a whole bottle of rye waiting,' I told him.

Ackie got to his feet hastily. 'Why not say so before?' he demanded. 'Where the hell's my hat?'

On the way down to my apartment Ackie talked ball games. He didn't know much about the game, but he liked to air his views. I let him talk. I'd got things to think about.

Once I got him in an armchair with a big rye and ginger in his hand, I got down to things.

'This ain't to go further, Mo,' I began, putting my feet on the table, 'but it looks to me like I've gotta put the cards down before you'll give me a hand. I want help, Mo, and I want it from you.'

Ackie grunted, but he didn't say anything.

'I stand to pick up ten grand if I start a row about Vessi's execution,' I said.

Ackie looked up sharply. 'Who's slippin' you the dough?'

I shook my head. 'That's under my lid,' I said. 'Ten grand's nice money, and from what I've picked up already there's something mighty phoney about Vessi's case. It begins to look as if it was a frame-up from the very start.'

Ackie looked worried. 'You'd better lay off this, Nick,' he said seriously. 'You might run into a lotta grief.'

'Come on,' I said shortly, 'let's have it. What's it all about?'

I could see him making up his mind. In a minute or so I could see I was going to get it all right.

'Larry Richmond was the President of the Mackenzie Fabric Corporation,' he said slowly, fixing his eyes on a spot just above my head. 'A great many guys are stockholders in this business. These guys are the big shots of commerce and industry. People who hold public office.'

I leant forward and took the glass out of his hand and refilled it. He took it from me with a little grimace. 'Shouldn't touch the stuff,' he said. 'It rusts my guts or somethin'.'

'Keep going,' I said.

'Maybe you think there ain't anythin' odd about this, but there is. Richmond privately negotiated all the stock to these people. It was never thrown on to the open market. You know how Richmond stood in society. He'd only have to go around and drop a hint or two, and the lot was over-subscribed.' He paused to take a long pull at his glass. 'If anything turns up now to reopen an investigation into Richmond's death there's goin' to be a lot of trouble for those stockholders.'

I didn't hurry him. This was news to me, and I wasn't sure where it was getting me. 'How come?' I said.

Ackie turned his eyes on me. 'Even my boss has got stock in the business,' he said. 'He's told us boys to lay off. We don't know, but we've got a good idea that the Mackenzie Fabric Corporation is a blind, and another racket is goin' on behind the scenes that pays the big divs. The guys who've got their dough in there don't want to know anythin' – they're scared sick that some smart monkey like you'll come along an' blow the lid off.'

I got to my feet. 'What's the racket?'

Ackie shrugged. 'Gawd knows. Could be anythin'. The point is that so many of the big shots have got their dough in the business that it's mighty dangerous to start anything.'

'Vessi was the mug?'

Ackie nodded. 'Sure Vessi was the mug. Some guy didn't like his rake-off, so he plugs Richmond. This guy was connected with the firm. They couldn't prosecute him without blowin' the gaff, so they find a fall-guy. Vessi gets the killin' pushed on to him. That's the story, Bud – now forget it, will you?'

I said: 'Who's Lu Spencer?'

Ackie shot me a quick look. 'Spencer was Richmond's right hand. He's the guy who's taken over now Richmond's dead.'

'Lu Spencer was the guy who killed Richmond, huh?'

Ackie's face went blank. 'I wouldn't know that,' he said, a sudden caution in his voice.

'Okay, Mo,' I said, 'you've given me the dope. Thanks a lot.'

Ackie got to his feet. 'You ain't goin' to start any trouble?' he asked. There was a glint in his eye that told me he was hoping I would.

'Suppose we don't go into that?' I returned. 'Whatever happens, I'll play this carefully. Didn't they say that Richmond was playing around with Vessi's girl, and that's why Vessi knocked him off?'

Ackie nodded. 'Yeah,' he said, 'that was the angle.'

'Who was she, Mo?'

Ackie frowned. 'She was a French moll,' he said slowly. 'They kept her covered up at the trial. Andrée somethin' or other . . . they call her Blondie on her beat.'

I scratched my head. 'She a professional dame?' I asked, surprised.

Ackie nodded. 'Sure . . . Vessi liked them to keep themselves, you know.'

'I guess I want to meet this dame,' I said, 'I might get an angle—'

'I don't know where she hangs out, but she goes into the Hotcha Bar most nights.'

I patted him on the back. 'Here, Bud, take the rye,' I said, turning back to the table. 'I guess you've earned it.'

Ackie sneered. 'Come to, bum,' he said, 'I got that already.

An' say, who's the guy that's putting up ten grand for this story to be blown up?'

I pushed him to the door. 'It's my big Aunty Belle,' I said, shoving him into the dark corridor.

'Yeah?' he said. 'You mean your big Aunt Fanny, don'tcher?'

I shut the door behind him.

When I was sure that he had gone, I went to the cupboard and took out another bottle of rye, stripped off the tissue paper and pulled the cork. I took the bottle into the other room and sat on the bed. I undressed slowly, giving my mind some exercise. When I was ready, I fetched a glass and some ginger seltzer and got into bed.

This all wanted thinking about. It seemed to me that I'd got a job on. That didn't worry me, but I liked to see where I was heading.

Right now, I wasn't doing too badly. I was selling articles where and when I liked. Editors liked my stuff and paid fancy rates for it. I'd got a nice little apartment, and enough booze to keep me oiled for twenty-four hours a day.

I leant forward and took a poke at the rye.

Suppose I did start something, and there was an investigation? If the Mackenzie-whatever-they-called-it turned out a ramp, then there was going to be a bad smell around, and I would be the cause of it. Maybe the newspapers would warn me off . . . maybe I'd lose everything I'd got . . . just for ten grand. Looked at from that angle, it wasn't even interesting.

I put the glass back on the little table by my bed and lit a cigarette. When I got into bed with a load of grief like this, I always thought it would be swell to have some hot-looking dame right beside me to listen to my beef and give me an angle to work on.

A woman can be a lot of comfort, and the more I thought about it, the lower I got. I was just getting in a pretty bad shape when the telephone snapped me out of my pipe-dream.

As I reached for the 'phone, I looked over at the clock. It was just after two.

'Yeah?' I said, wondering who the hell it was.

'Is that Nick Mason?'

As soon as I heard that hard, metallic voice I sat up. My arm jogged the glass of rye, which went over with a crash. Even the spilling of good liquor didn't take my mind off that voice, Four days ago she had rung me up. Without saying who she was, she told me that I'd get a pass to attend Vessi's execution and I was to try and get a word with him. If I thought I could expose a frame-up, she'd pay me ten thousand dollars. She had hung up before I could say a word.

Boy! Was I intrigued! I could handle that sort of mystery stuff from dawn to dawn. Not only was the incentive there in the way of cash, but the story angle got me excited.

And here she was again. The voice was unmistakable. It was clear, bell-like and hard.

I sank back on my pillow, holding the 'phone tight.

'You got it right, sister,' I said.

'Did you go?'

'Yeah.'

'What happened?'

'He's dead. I got word with him. He said Lu Spencer had pulled it.'

I heard her catch her breath. 'He said that?' she asked eagerly.

'Yeah . . . now listen, what's the big idea? What's all this to you?'

'I'm goin' to send you five thousand dollars so that you can go on with this. When you've found out the truth and have written it all up you'll get the other five.'

I was scared that she was going to cut off. I said quickly, 'I ain't interested . . . I've looked into this an' there's too much to it.'

There was a long silence on the line.

I said anxiously, 'You there?'

She said, 'Yes . . . I thought you'd be glad to do it. I see I've made a mistake.'

'Suppose we get together an' talk this over?' I said. 'This is a big set-up, baby. All the big shots are in on this . . . it wants talkin' over.'

She said, 'I think you'll do it all right,' and before I could shout she had hung up.

I lay there, calling her some fancy names. It didn't get me anywhere She was right about me doing it. I liked to push my nose into something that might scorch it. This business had a lot of angles that might prove interesting. I put the 'phone down and turned off the light. I could think a lot better in the dark.

I went through the business carefully. I'd got a few leads to follow up. First, I'd look into the stockholders of the Mackenzie Fabric Corporation. Then I might take a look at the firm and have a sniff round there. Lu Spencer wanted hunting up. Ackie was an all-right guy, and I guessed he was willing to help me if I didn't pull him into it. Then there was Blondie. Maybe I'd get a little fun with Blondie. I had a weakness for blondes, anyway. It looked on the face of it an attractive programme.

I let it go at that and went to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

SOMEONE woke me up by punching the front-door bell. I love that. Some guy always wakes me up just when I'm getting friendly with my dream blonde. That dame certainly is a nice little twitchet.

I dragged myself out of bed and padded across the two rooms to the front door.

A special messenger was leaning up against the door, humming Cole Porter. He looked at me, then at the envelope he was holding.

'Nick Mason?' he asked.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Let's have it, you mother's nightmare.'

He gave me the envelope and I signed. Then he stood there waiting to pick up something. He'd got a hope. If he thought I was giving him anything he was crazy. I only hoped he'd fall downstairs on his way and break his neck. I started to shut the door.

'You won't get any place in that sleepin'-suit,' he said, and made a dash down the corridor. Maybe he thought I'd give him a poke in his puss.

I went back to the bedroom and took a look in the long glass. The kid was right. That sleeping-suit was terrible. I sat on the bed and ripped open the envelope. Five crisp thousand-dollar bills spilt on my knees. No letter – just the dough. I sat and looked at them for a few minutes. That's one thing I can always do – sit around, looking at money. Then I put the money back in the envelope and put the envelope on the table.

There was a catch in this, of course. I'd got to start right now and earn that dough. I wandered into the bathroom and took off the sleeping-suit. The cold prickle of the shower made me feel good. Once I got through with the wet part of getting up, I always tried my hand at singing. Maybe I wasn't so good, but I'd got a lot of power. I wrapped the towel round my waist and shaved, then I wandered back into the bedroom with the idea of having a drink to help me on the final task of dressing.

Two things struck me as soon as I entered the bedroom. There was a heavy smell of scent hanging around that certainly hadn't been there when I left the room, and *the envelope had gone.*

I moved quickly. Dropping the towel, I grabbed my dressing-gown and struggled into it, running into the sitting-room as I did so. The front door was ajar. I raced to the window and threw it up. The street was deserted. I thought I caught a glimpse of a yellow taxi flashing round the corner, but I wasn't sure. If it was a taxi, it was moving like hell.

I went back to the bedroom and stood sniffing. I'm not one of those guys who can classify a smell quickly, but I knew this stuff all right. It was the kind of scent hot mammas used to get the boys running in circles.

Right then, I was running in circles. I was as mad as a blind man at a strip tease. I went over to the telephone with the idea of getting the cops, then a thought struck me and I sat down to think about it.

Those dollar notes had looked mighty nice, and now some dame had nicked them. I was feeling mighty sore.

After a few quick drags from the rye I felt better, and I got myself dressed. All the time I wondered what the devil I was going to do. The sooner I started in on this the better. I locked up the apartment and went downstairs for my breakfast.

I ordered two lightly boiled eggs, toast and coffee. I was just getting down to serious eating when the guy who rented the apartment opposite walked in. This guy gave me a pain. There are some guys who just can't help giving anyone a pain. You don't know why – they try like hell to put themselves across, but they stick.

I tried to hide behind my newspaper, but I was too late. He came across with an odd expression on his face and sat down.

He said, trying to look shocked, 'You didn't ought to have girls in your place, Mason; it gives the building a bad name.'

I said, 'You're kiddin' yourself. The place had a bad name long before I moved in. Besides, I don't know what you're talking about. What's all this about dames?'

The waitress came up just then and took his order for tomato-juice and toast. When she had gone, he spread himself over the table. 'I saw her when I was getting the paper,' he said. 'She came out fast, just like she had been chased out.'

I thought: if I'd seen her, she'd come out faster than that.

'You're nuts,' I said. 'Soon as I saw you, I thought your liver had been shot to hell.'

A look of doubt crossed his face, then he came back again. 'You can't kid me,' he said, with an attempt to leer. 'She was some baby . . . a real hot mamma.'

I finished my coffee and lit a cigarette. 'Do you often get like this?' I said anxiously. 'I bet you'll be able to describe her to me.'

'Sure I can,' he said. 'She was tall, blonde, with a make-up that just knocked me. She wore black, and had a large black felt hat, and a gold something or other round her neck. She was moving fast, but I'd know her any time.'

I got to my feet, pushing the chair away with the back of my legs. I looked down at him in concern. 'You gotta do something about this,' I said. 'You go an' see a croaker . . . you've been seeing things.'

I walked out of the restaurant, leaving him snorting. Once I was on the street I walked slowly, picking my way through the crowds milling to work.

So she was blonde, tall and dressed in black. A sweet job to look for a dame with that description. Still, she'd got my five grand, and I was going to find her or bust.

Maybe Ackie would know where she fitted in. I turned into a drug-store and rang the press-room, but he wasn't there. They thought he was over at Hank's pool-room having a game, but they weren't sure.

I took a taxi down to Hank's, but he wasn't there either. They thought he'd show up, so I spent a little time practising shots on one of the tables.

I never managed to get the knack of the game, but it interested me and whenever I got near a table I just had to push the balls around. I got so interested in a cannon-shot that seemed to be going just right that I lost count of the time. After I had broken my combination up, I thought I'd better give Ackie a miss and get on to the street again. As I was moving, a long, thin dope, dressed like a mock member of the upper crust, wandered in and stood watching me, He said suddenly, 'What about a little game with a dollar or so on for interest?'

I've met these dopes before. They look so damn' dumb, you think it's a shame to take their dough, but once they've raised the ante to twenty-five bucks they make the ball do everything but eat a four-course lunch.

I put the cue on the table and shook my head. 'I'm through,' I said. 'You go an' get some practice.'

He picked up the cue and began potting the red. I expected him to make a hell of a mess of it, but he just went ahead and gave one of the finest exhibitions of shooting I'd ever seen. He slammed the balls into the pockets from every angle, and I just dug them out and rolled them back to him. He got a spin working that made the ball float round the table, and then he finished up with a real snorter that sunk the three balls with one shot.

'I see you've been a beginner some time,' I said, thinking I was lucky not to have played this guy.

He leant over the table to dig out a ball, and his coat shifted up over his hip. I saw the handle of a gun sticking out of his hip-pocket. 'Me? I'm punk,' he said. 'I just like pushin' the balls around.'

I took a close look at this guy. He still looked a dope, but when you examined him closely, his eyes gave him away. This guy was tough. He'd got a hanging lip that gave him the soft look, but his eyes were suspicious and hard.

He was quick to see my interest, and he leant against the table and began to clean his nails with a pocket-knife. 'Ain't seen you around before?' he said, his voice rising a little, making it a question.

I shook my head. 'Just looked in for a pal,' I told him. I wondered who he was, so I thought a little harmless talk wouldn't waste my time.

'I guess I've seen your face before,' he said, without looking up.

'Yeah? Maybe you have.'

'You wouldn't be Mason, the news writer?' He overdid it. He knew who I was.

'Sure,' I said. 'Maybe you've seen my photo somewhere.'

'Yeah.' He folded the knife and put it in his vest-pocket.

'Yeah, maybe I have.' He gave me a long, hard look, then, tossing the cue on to the table, he walked out.

I watched him go thoughtfully. I couldn't quite get the angle. I went over to the bar. Hank was polishing glasses. He was a big guy with red, curly hair and tremendous hands and arms.

'Who's the dope?' I said jerking my head towards the door.

Hank shrugged. 'Search me,' he said. 'What'll you have?'

'Ain't you seen him before?'

'I don't remember.'

Just then Ackie came in. When he saw me he grinned. 'What the hell are you doin' here?' he said, crowding up to the bar. 'Two ryes and ginger,' he said to Hank.

'I wanted to see you,' I said, 'so I looked in on the off-chance.'

Hank put the rye in front of us. He beamed at Ackie. 'You all right, mister?' he asked.

Ackie leant forward and patted Hank's arm. 'Me? I feel fine, couldn't be better.'

It looked like these two knew each other, so I tried again.

'That guy who was playin' on the table over there – who was he?'

Hank stopped laughing. His little eyes shifted like quicksilver. 'I tell you I don't know him,' he said.

Ackie looked at me, then he looked at Hank. Ackie was a smart guy. He saw the set-up without being told. 'Spill it, Hank . . . this guy's a pal of mine,' he said.

'I tell you I don't know.' Hank was getting angry. 'I can't waste all my time with you gents . . . I gotta get on with my work.' He walked to the far end of the bar and began polishing glasses down there.

Ackie looked after him thoughtfully and poured himself another rye. 'What's it all about?' he asked.

I shrugged. 'Maybe it's nothing. I was pushing some balls around an' some guy offers to play me. I turned him down, an' while he was showin' off I spotted a gun in his pocket. Then he asked if my name was Mason, took a hard gander at me and beat it. I was just wondering who he was. This bar bozo knows who he was, but won't say.'

Ackie frowned. 'What's this fella like?'

'A tall, thin bird, with a hanging lip and cold, hard eyes. He looked a dope, but I guess he was tough all right.'

Ackie's eye's narrowed. 'This guy knows how to handle a cue?'

'Sure, he's the hottest thing I've seen.'

'That's Earl Katz,' Ackie said. 'Well! Well!'

I shook my head. 'That's a new one on me.'

'Yeah, you wouldn't know him. He's a bad guy all right. One of Lu Spencer's gunmen.'

I put my glass on the bar with a sharp little click. 'Lu Spencer?' I said.

Ackie nodded. 'Yeah ... looks to me like they're watchin' you already.'

'What makes Hank get the jitters about a dope like that?' I asked.

'Katz a dope?' Ackie wagged his bullet head. 'You're crazy. That guy's as deadly as a rattlesnake. Don't go gettin' ideas about him. Why, Hank and the rest of us are scared sick of him.'

I took another poke at the rye. 'Well, I don't mind telling you,' I said quietly, 'that guy ain't goin' to make me nervous.'

Ackie shrugged. 'You wait till you know him,' he said.

I glanced round the room, but the place was still empty except for Hank, who was keeping away from us. I lowered my voice. 'I had a little adventure last night. A dame dropped in and pinched some dough off me.'

Ackie looked interested. 'You mean she came in and took your roll or somethin'?'

'I was havin' a shower and she got in, knocked off a nice slice of my rent and skipped without me seein' her. A guy who lives opposite me saw her go. I'm tyin' her up to this business, an' I wondered if you might know who she was.'

Ackie looked incredulous. 'Why the hell should I know?'

'Can you fit in a dame that's blonde and dresses in black? Wears a big felt hat and looks like a real hot mamma?'

Ackie shook his head. 'Why should you tie her up to the Vessi business?' he asked.

I wasn't going to tell him that, but just as I was getting set to air off my imagination he got it. Ackie had a lot of brain under his hat. 'Jeeze! That's a howl,' he said, smacking his thigh and giving one of his grunting laughs. 'You got paid, huh? They slipped you the ten grand already an' someone pinches it.' He leant against the counter and hooted.

When he'd got through with his fun, he mopped his eyes with his sleeve and grinned at me maliciously. 'Gee! That's tough,' he said. 'So a blonde hotcha got away with your dough.'

I said 'Yeah,' and gave myself another drink. 'Suppose you cut out the sympathy and bend your brains on this. Can't you give me a lead on the blonde?'

Ackie shook his head. 'What do you take me for? Think I know all the blondes in town?'

I said slowly, 'It wouldn't be Vessi's moll, would it?'

Ackie looked suddenly uncomfortable. 'Listen, Nick,' he said, 'I like you, but I've got to keep out of this . . . do you understand? You go ahead if you want a funeral on your hands, but you've gotta keep me out of it.'

'All right, all right,' I said, 'forget it. I'll look into this on my own.'

Ackie nodded. 'You're the sorta guy who might crack this without gettin' hurt.'

A nice line in comfort this guy had got, I thought. I looked at my watch. It was getting on for lunch-time. 'Okay, Mo,' I said, 'I'll be seeing you.' I left him giving himself another rye.

I stood on the kerb thinking. It was a theory of mine to take the fight always to the other guy. I was not quite sure if I was going to be right this time. Maybe I'd start something that I couldn't finish. I didn't know. Then I thought I might as well go ahead and see what happened, so I signalled a taxi and told the driver to take me to the Hoffman Building quick.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE taxi turned me loose outside the Hoffman Building, and I took the elevator to the tenth floor.

The Mackenzie Fabric Corporation was some joint. The entrance was the finest exhibition for chromium wear I'd seen all in one spot, and, once inside, I nearly sank up to my knees in the pile of the carpet. The big reception lobby was as busy as a main-line railway station. At the far end I could make out the reception-desk, that was pretty near swamped by a crowd of shouting men, yelling to see Mr. Someone or other.

I stood inside the door, taking a look round. Every now and then a dame would come out of a room and flounce across the lobby. They were all hand-picked, and I began to think I wouldn't mind having a job of work here myself.

I wandered over to the desk. The mob was still struggling for attention. I stood watching them for a moment, than I took a match, struck it on the sole of my shoe and set fire to a newspaper one of the kikes had under his arm. I stood back and waited.

There was almost a riot when the paper flared up. While they were all trying to put the fire out, I got in front and asked the girl to put me through to Spencer's secretary.

She was also a smart jane. 'Have you an appointment?' she asked, watching with half an eye the commotion going on amongst the kikes.

I was getting sick of this. 'Listen, sister,' I said; 'ring and tell whoever looks after Mr. Spencer's business that Nick Mason's outside, an' if I'm kept waiting much longer I'm going to get annoyed.'

She looked at me thoughtfully, making up her mind whether or not I was bluffing, then she decided I wasn't and rang through. I stood over her while she gave the message. She pulled the plug out. 'Room 26, on your right,' she said briefly.

'Thank you, baby . . . I hope your dreams include me tonight.'

I went over to Room 26, knocked on the door and went in. It was a small room, obviously an outer office. A flat-top desk took up most of the space. The carpet was like grass, and there was one good painting of a nude on the wall. The nude held my attention for a second. It was the first thing you saw when you came into the room. I thought, after I'd taken a quick look, that if they were built that way these days the cushion trade would be shot to hell.

I got my eyes down to the desk. Sitting there was a dizzy-looking brunette. Now don't get me wrong about this girl. She wasn't Ritzy – she was the kind of girl you'd take home to your ma and not be nervous of starting a riot. She'd got a lot of soft brown hair and her eyes were large and brown. Her mouth was large and generous and her nose was small and cute.

'You'll pardon me,' I said. 'That dame up there got me startled. I didn't see you.'

She smiled. 'Mr. Mason?'

I put my hat on the desk and sat down. 'Yeah,' I said, 'Nick Mason. I want to see Lu Spencer.'

Her eyes opened a little. 'Mr. Spencer's engaged. You can't see him without an appointment.'

I sat back and looked at her. I couldn't understand what this girl had got that interested me. She didn't make up much, she wasn't over- or under-dressed, and yet I thought she was swell.

She broke in on my thoughts. 'If you'll let me know what you want to see him about, I might arrange it.'

I said, 'It's a little involved, Miss . . . er . . . Miss. . . .'

She didn't help, but just sat there, looking at me a little old-fashioned, and waited.

I got an inspiration. 'Suppose you an' I go out and eat somewhere, an' talk it over.' I glanced at my watch. 'It's just after one, so the time's right. I got a lot to say, and maybe you can tell me if Mr. Spencer's the right guy to see.'

I could see she was all set to say 'no'. At the same time, her eyes told me that I wasn't something out of cheese. She almost looked like she could be persuaded.

'Now don't be high-hat,' I pleaded. 'Give me a chance to tell you all about it.'

She got to her feet. 'Very well, Mr. Mason, let us go to lunch.'

Believe it or not, I was getting a kick out of this girl. Me, getting a kick out of a girl. I could hear forty thousand floozies turning over in their graves.

We went down in the elevator. I said, 'Suppose we go to Sloppy Joe's?'

She laughed. 'I'd love to . . . where is it?'

I jerked my head at a taxi. 'It's a dollar ride downtown,' I said.

The yellow taxi drew up and the driver swung the door open. He took one look at the girl and gave me a wink. 'I'll drive nice an' slow, Capt.,' he said.

These taxi guys were a big help sometimes. I helped her in. 'Sloppy Joe's Buddy,' I said, 'an' just shut your window, will you?'

'Sure, Capt.,' he said with a leer, 'an' I won't look round. You go ahead an' enjoy yourself.'

I got into the bus just a trifle flustered. I saw from a mischievous smile that she'd heard all right.

'These guys've got low minds,' I said, settling down in the far corner. 'Maybe we ought to know each other. I'm Nick Mason . . . I believe I've said that before.'

She said, 'I'm Mardi Jackson.'

I said, 'I'm glad to meet you,' and we laughed. I thought she'd got a swell name. I liked that. It suited her.

'Well, Miss Jackson,' I said, offering her a cigarette, 'you're Spencer's secretary . . . right?'

She took the cigarette. 'That's right,' she said. 'Don't you write articles?'

I lit her cigarette and mine. 'That's how I keep the wolf from the door,' I said. 'It's a grand way to earn a livin'. I could tell you stories that would do things to you.'

'Well, perhaps one day you'll tell me.'

That's the way it went. Tossing flowers at each other all the way. For the first time since I reached the age I sat in a taxi and didn't make a pass. Most dames are so dumb you had to get going or you'd die of boredom. Others think they've wasted their time if you don't, but this baby was just worth looking at and saving it for a big occasion.

Sloppy Joe's was pretty full when we got there, but the Greek head waiter saw me and waved from the far end of the room. We went down the aisle between the tables. I got a big kick out of the way the men stopped eating to get a gander at Mardi. Even those guys with their own molls had a quick side look.

The Greek was all over me. I'd given his eating-joint a good write-up every so often, and I fed on the house whenever I liked.

He had a table all right. Mardi gave him an amused smile as he bowed himself in half. I could see she was making a big hit with the old guy, and somehow that pleased me, too.

I saw him shoot me a quick look and I gave him a grin. 'You're lookin' pretty good,' I said.

When we were seated, the Greek produced the bill of fare, that was as long as my arm. I looked at Mardi. 'How hungry are you?' I asked.

She nodded. 'Plenty.'

'How about a mushroom canape, and a Swiss steak with what goes with it to follow?'

'That sounds lovely.'

'Okay, make that twice, Nic,' I said, 'and make it fast.'

She began stripping off her gloves. I kept my eyes on her fingers. No rings. I was surprised at my relief.

'Now, Mr. Mason, suppose you tell me all about it.'

I shook my head. 'Don't rush it,' I said, 'I gotta get used to you.'

Again her eyebrows went up. 'Don't you think,' she said quietly, 'we'd better talk business? I'm due back in an hour.'

Back came the Greek with the canape.

After he had fussed around a bit and made sure we had nothing to beef about, he took himself off. It gave me a little time to use my brain. 'I guess I'll put my cards on the table,' I said. I seemed to be wearing that phrase out. 'Have you ever heard of a guy called Vessi?'

I saw her give a little start. She looked up quickly. Her eyes were full of questions.

'I see you have,' I cut in before she could say anything. 'The guy who was executed the other night. Well, I'm interested in him and the story that is hanging to him. I was wondering if you could give me a line on him yourself?'

'I?' She was surprised. I told myself I'd drawn blank here. 'But why should I give you any information? What information?'

I shook my head. 'No, I guess I was wrong. Okay, forget it, will you?'

Her chin tilted. 'No, I will not forget it,' she said. 'What makes you think I could have told you anything?'

I saw she was getting a little fussed. I didn't want to fall out with this baby . . . I liked her too much. I'd got to be careful, for all that. After all, she was Spencer's secretary. I shook my head. 'I'm sorry to have brought it up,' I said, 'I was just bein' too smart. You're right. A girl like you wouldn't know anything about Vessi . . . I guess I owe you an apology.'

She smiled. A little, determined smile. 'That still doesn't answer my question, does it?' she said.

I grinned back at her. 'Don't put me in a spot, sister,' I said. 'I thought maybe I was going to get somewhere if I jumped it on you, but I see I was backin' the wrong gee. I'd tell you all about it if I could, but for the moment I've got to keep this under my hat. Suppose you tell me how I can get in to see Spencer?'

The Swiss steak did a lot to break up the hostile atmosphere, but she wasn't going to let me get away with it as easily as that.

She looked at me pretty straight. 'You know, Mr. Mason, I don't like this at all. You said you wanted to talk business. My business is to do with Fabrics. Then you start some story about a wretched gunman instead. Is this a cheap joke?'

I found I was getting flustered. This certainly was something new to me.

I said feebly, 'This ain't a joke. I'm dead serious, but I'm in a spot. . . .'

She pushed back her chair. 'In that case, Mr. Mason,' she said coldly, 'I don't think we need waste any more time.'

Another dame would have got herself smacked, but this baby had me jumping through hoops. I said urgently, 'Don't go, don't walk out on me . . . I'll come clean on this.'

She shook her head. 'No . . . I think I'd better go.' But she made no move. Maybe she was the cutest of them all, but she was woman enough to be curious. I took a look over my shoulder to see how close the next table was, satisfied myself that no one could hear me, and dived right into the story. I gave it to her from the first gong to the last.

She sat with her hands in her lap, her eyes wide, her lips parted. I gave her the story with everything I had, and I held her to the last word. Sitting there, I thought she looked swell.

'Apart from the ten grand,' I concluded, 'this frame-up interests me. It would make a swell story, and I always like to think the right guy gets the right punishment.'

She said, in barely a whisper. 'But . . . but . . . Mr. Spencer . . . no, I can't believe that. . . .'

I shrugged. 'I've never met the guy. At the same time, why the hell does he have a gunman? Why should a guy in Fabrics be mixed up with a thug like Katz?'

I saw her suddenly give a little shiver. 'You know a little more about this than you're lettin' me think. Ain't that right?'

She hesitated. Then she shook her head. 'I can't help you. . . . I'm his personal secretary. . . . You see that, don't you?'

I scratched my jaw. 'Yeah, I guess so,' I said doubtfully. 'At the same time, baby, you gotta remember that this is a murder rap, and accessories don't get much pity.'

She went a little white when I said this, but she again shook her head. 'No, not now,' she said firmly.

'Okay,' I said. 'Maybe later.'

The Greek brought the coffee and I gave her a cigarette. We sat there in silence, smoking. I wasn't sure where I was going from here. I had hoped that something would have broken, but it seemed as tight shut as before.

'I guess I'd better look this Spencer guy over,' I said at last. 'Maybe I'll get something out of him.'

Mardi fiddled with her coffee-spoon. 'I wish you wouldn't,' she said, without looking at me. 'Don't you think that it would be better to leave this business alone?'

I raised my eyebrows. I must say I was getting a hell of a lot of encouragement on this job. 'I've gotta get into this,' I said. 'Can't you understand with a thing like this there's a big angle as a story hanging to it? If I bust this thing, I'll start a riot. I shall be the guy responsible. It'll mean something then.'

'I don't want to sound a crab,' she said, putting her hand suddenly on my sleeve, 'but isn't it a bit big? I mean . . . I don't want you to think. . . .' She stopped in confusion.

'Meanin' I'm a small-town hick an' might get a swell belly-ache if I bit this off an' couldn't chew it?' I grinned at her to show her I wasn't mad.

She looked at me then, and her eyes were troubled. 'No, I didn't mean that quite,' she said. 'But if what you have told me is true . . . isn't it rather one-sided? Don't you think you ought to have someone to back you, if you're determined to go ahead?'

I tapped the ash off my cigarette. This was the kind of girl I'd thought about for a long time. A girl who talked things over and put out ideas. 'Suppose you were handlin' this, what would you do?'

She didn't hesitate. 'I wouldn't make a move until I found out who the woman was who telephoned you. Why she was giving you all the money. What were her interests in starting the investigation.'

I nodded. 'Yeah,' I said, 'that's a swell idea, but not easy. Just a voice on the telephone . . . wants some finding.'

She glanced at her watch and gave a little exclamation. 'I must go,' she said, stubbing out the cigarette and gathering her gloves and bag. 'Thank you for the lunch.'

I pushed back the chair and followed her. 'You haven't paid the check,' she said softly.

I grinned. 'Not in this burg,' I said, waving to the Greek. He beat me to the door and held it open.

'I hope,' he said, bowing in half, 'you will bring the beautiful lady again.'

Mardi flushed, but I could see she was mighty pleased. I nodded. 'You'll be seein' her again,' I promised.

I called a taxi. She turned to me. 'I hope you won't come back to the office,' she said quickly. 'I hope you won't do anything silly until you've thought about things. Find out who that woman is first.'

With a quick smile she climbed into the taxi, and I stood there and let her go.

From across the street, Earl Katz suddenly stepped from a doorway. He looked across at me, tossed a cigarette butt in my direction, and then walked slowly in the same direction as Mardi's taxi had gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

I DIDN'T get off to the Hotcha Club until late. After Mardi had left me, and Katz had made his unexpected appearance, I had a wander round and had a little brain exercise. It didn't get me anywhere, but I did think maybe I'd wait a little while before exposing my hand to Spencer. Having a living to earn, I attended a ball game, went home and wrote it up, mailed it to a sports paper that took my stuff, and went out to dinner.

By the time I got through it was getting on for ten o'clock. It was a hot night, with stars and a big moon. I thought I'd go along and see if I could have a look at Vessi's moll.

The Hotcha Club was one of those swell dives that look good but are pretty rank when you examine them close. I got a table in a corner, ordered a big rye high-ball, and passed the time with a newspaper.

The place was pretty crowded, and the dames were not all they should be. I sat around for a half an hour, but as I didn't see anyone who really got me interested, I began to wonder what the hell I was doing there.

Finally, I gave the waiter the high sign that brought him over. He was a tall, miserable-looking guy with big, watery eyes and a blue chin.

I took a fin from my vest-pocket and began to play with it. His eyes fixed on it with interest.

'Listen, Buddy,' I said, 'I'm looking for a dame who comes in here pretty often. Maybe you can tell me where I can find her.'

With his eyes still fixed on the note, he said, 'Sure . . . who is she?'

'She's called Blondie,' I said, 'an' she works a beat somewhere around.'

An oily smile settled on his face. I could see this was a pushover for him. 'Sure,' he said, 'I know her all right. She's been in. I guess she's workin' right now.'

I pushed the fin over to him and he gathered it up mighty quick. 'Where do I find her?' I asked.

'Corner of 10th.'

I got to my feet. 'Thanks, pal,' I said.

He shrugged. 'She's a great dame,' he said, collecting my glass.

I paused. 'So I've heard,' I said. 'This is my first trip. Shall I find her easily?'

'Sure,' he said, 'you'll find her. A tall dame in black.' He grinned a little. 'Blondie's tough when she likes to be.'

I went out into the street. A tall dame in black. A feeling of excitement surged through me. I wouldn't let my mind think for the moment. I'd wait and see this dame for myself.

The corner of 10th was deserted when I arrived. The whole street was in semi-gloom. The street lights were widely spaced and none of the shops carried lights. I thought it was a pretty poor place to find trade, but maybe she knew her job better than I did.

I stood on the corner and lit a cigarette. I stood there for five minutes. I knew it was five minutes because I was so fidgety that I kept my eyes constantly on my watch.

Then, just when I was losing patience, she came out of the gloom. I heard the slow click of wooden heels some time before I saw her and I stiffened, throwing my cigarette into the gutter. Dimly I could see her, moving deliberately towards me, a tall, shadowy figure in black.

I half-turned towards her, so that she could have no mistake as to my intentions. I watched the white blur that was her face eagerly for the first glimpse of her features.

She saw me waiting there, and her step slowed. One hand went to her hip, and she put on a slight sway as she dawdled towards me.

When she was close, I smelt her. The same heady scent that I had smelt in my bedroom. I felt grimly elated; so this was the dame who'd lifted five grand off me.

'Hello,' she said, stopping at my elbow. She was nearly as tall as I was, and her big black hat screened her face. I could just make out her rather pointed chin and the sparkle in her eyes.

I said, 'Hello, good-lookin', how's tricks?'

She gave that throaty, purring laugh that Mae West had made popular. 'Are you coming home with me, darlin'?' she said, putting one gloved hand on my sleeve.

I grinned to myself. You bet I was going home with this floozie, and she was going to get a hell of a surprise when we got there.

'Sure,' I said, 'I've been lookin' for a baby like you all the evenin'.'

'Have you, darlin'?' She laughed again. I wish she'd lay off the "darlin" for a bit. I told myself she'd be calling me something different mighty soon.

I said, 'Let's go. . . .'

'It's just here,' she said, waving her hand towards the end of the street.

We walked down the street, and she was the first dame I'd walked out with who kept in step. I said, for something to say, 'That perfume you wear sure knocks me.'

'You like it, darlin'?'

There she went again. 'Yeah,' I said. 'It sortta hangs around, doesn't it? I bet you leave quite a trail wherever you go.'

She missed a step and her right foot went with my left. I changed, to get it right. 'What a funny boy you are, darlin',' she said, looking at me quickly from under her hat.

'Yeah,' I said, 'crazy as a bug.'

She stopped outside a door next to a small all-night eating-house. Dimly I could see a little brass plate screwed on to the door. I struck a match and read, 'Andrée Kersh'.

'My, my,' I said, 'so you put your name on the door.'

'Of course, darlin'.' She fumbled with her bag and found a key. 'When you come again, I want you to find me easily.'

I thought this dame was mighty good at kidding herself. The next time I called on her, she'd greet me with a flat-iron.

I followed her up a short flight of stairs, past the lobby of the eating-house, up some more stairs, past two doors, also with brass plates, and up some more stairs still.

She came to a small landing and again opened a door. 'Here we are, darlin',' she said.

I stepped into the room. One of those small joints. You open the front door and step into a double bed. The room was all bed.

I wedged myself round her and got to the far end of the room. The bed divided us. I had to admit she'd taken a lot of trouble in fixing the room. It had a lot of neat little gadgets, and some of the pictures she'd got hanging on the wall even made me take a look.

I said, 'You've got a swell apartment here, ain't you?'

She pulled off her hat and fluffed up her blonde hair. We took a look at each other. I'll give her this. She hadn't the usual hard, gimme face of the streetwalker. She would have been quite a looker if her chin wasn't so pointed. That rather hardened her face, but for the rough work she was all right. If I hadn't been sitting with Mardi for an hour, I guess this floozie would have interested me more than somewhat.

I tossed my hat on a peg and grinned at her. She had given me one long, searching glance, summed me up, and her smile back was full of things to come.

'You like it, huh?' she said.

That's another thing I love. When a dame says 'huh'.

At the head of the bed, and on each side, were two doors. She said, 'I won't be a minute,' and before I could stop her she went through one of the doors.

I sat on the bed and lit a cigarette. Somewhere in this joint was my five grand, unless she'd pushed it into a safe deposit. If she'd done that I was sunk, but, knowing how these floozies like to keep their dough right by their hand, I wasn't going to be disappointed.

She came in again wearing a come-hither smile.

I wish I'd started my tricks before she got going, but it was too late now.

She came over and sat on the bed. 'May I have my present, darlin'?' she said.

This is where it was going to be tricky. I shook my head. 'You got it all wrong, baby,' I said. 'I'm charging you for this outing.'

I said she hadn't the usual hard, gimme face of the streetwalker. Well, I was wrong. I was crazy to have thought otherwise. Away went the bright smile and the flashing eye, just like they were blotted out with a sponge. Her face suddenly became set. 'What you mean?' she said, her voice suddenly taking on a harsh note. This dame was looking tough.

I flicked the ash off my cigarette. 'Just that,' I said, slowly putting myself in a position so that I could get up quick if she started anything. Something told me that she was likely to start something. 'Maybe we better get introduced, baby,' I went on. 'I'm Nick Mason.'

Just for a second she gave herself away, but then she came back again. 'You aren't tight, darlin'?' she asked. She had pulled a pillow from the bed and was holding it against her.

I said, 'Suppose we come down to earth. We might start by leaving out the darlings . . . they give me a pain.'

She got to her feet and walked over to the door.

'You crazy or something?' she said. 'You get out of here.'

'Don't get tough,' I said, still sitting on the bed. 'This morning you came to my apartment and took five grand off me. You hand that back an' we'll call it quits.'

She put on a good act. Her eyes opened wide and she actually managed a laugh. 'You're crazy!' she said. 'I've never seen you and I don't know where you live.'

I got slowly to my feet. 'Listen, baby,' I said gently, 'you ain't goin' to get anywhere with bluff. I've got you where I want you, an' I'm having that dough if I have to take this joint to pieces to get it. You ain't goin' to get tough, because I could twist your neck for you with one hand. Now come on an' be nice.'

She stood hesitating, then she shrugged. 'If that's the way you feel about it,' she said, 'maybe I'd better let you have it.'

I almost laughed. I let her get to the small chest of drawers and pull open one of the drawers, before I shot over the bed and smothered her. My arms went round her, pinning her arms to her side, and I jerked her away from the chest. I was glad I'd taken the precaution. I had just time to see a gun lying in the top drawer before she came at me.

I'd been in some nasty corners during my career as a journalist, and I'd been in plenty of rough houses as well, but this was the first time I'd mixed it with a woman, and I should just like to place it on record that I sincerely hope it will be the last.

I can look after myself when it comes to an all-in scrap with a man. I know most of the dodges they get up to and I know most of the answers, but when a blonde fury comes at you I was up-creek without a paddle.

I see now that I could have saved myself a hell of a lot of trouble if I'd socked her on the button and finished it there and then, but I was crazy enough to treat her light.

She came at me with her arms whirring around like the blade of a propeller and her eyes blazing. I tried to grab her arms, but got nowhere. The weight of her body struck me like a small shell, and I went over with her.

Hands clawing at my throat, she must have weighed around a hundred and forty pounds, and that's no joke to have dropped on you from above.

I managed to grab her wrists, and, by exerting a lot of beef, held her. Get the picture if you can. There I was, lying flat on my back, wedged between the wall and the bed, with Blondie, her wrists held, looking down as if she'd start murder any minute.

I said with a gasp, 'Relax, sister, this ain't the way for a lady to behave.'

For an answer the hell-cat butted me in the face with her head. Maybe she did have blonde curls, but her head was as hard as concrete. She must have knocked herself a bit silly, but it was nothing to what she did to my mug. I felt the blood start from my nose and I thought my front teeth were coming through my top lip.

I got as mad as a coon, and, shifting my grip on one of her wrists, I socked her as hard as I could. If you've ever tried to hit anyone, lying on your back, and wedged tight, you will know how difficult it is, but I managed to get a little steam through, sufficiently hard to send her backwards.

That just gave me time to struggle into a sitting position and sock her again as she came at me. This time I gave her a good one, but I hit her on the shoulder, so although it got rid of her it didn't stop her.

I was on my feet by the time she had got over that thump, and we stood there glaring at each other.

'Don't start anything, Mason,' a voice said by the door.

I looked quickly over my shoulder.

Earl Katz was standing in the doorway. He was holding a blue-nose automatic in his hand, and the barrel was pointing right at me.

CHAPTER SIX

SURPRISED? I'll say I was surprised! You could have knocked me down with a mangle. What the hell was Katz doing here? What connection had he with Vessi's moll?

I wasn't going to show him that he had pulled a quick one on me. I gave him a smile. 'Still pushin' them into pockets, Bud?' I said. 'An' talkin' about pool, did you hear the one about . . .'

'Skip it, Mason,' Katz said out of the side of his mouth. That's another thing I love. These guys who've been to so many tough movies that they just have to talk out of the side of their mouths, because they think it's the thing to do.

I sat on the bed. I said: 'Suppose you put the gun away and take it easy. This is a private matter between Blondie and me . . . it don't call for any outside interference.'

Katz said: 'You talk too much. Keep your trap shut. I'll do the talking an' you just answer . . . get it?'

I shrugged.

'What are you doin' here?' he asked.

I grinned. 'That's an easy one,' I said. 'What the hell would any man be doin' here?'

Katz pushed his hat at the back of his head and leant against the wall. He put a finger and thumb in his vest-pocket and took out a toothpick. He put the toothpick in his mouth and chewed it thoughtfully.

'If you don't like to talk straight,' he said, 'it's goin' to be tough for you.'

I said: 'Be your age, Katz. You can't get that way with me. I could make this town so hot for you that you'd have to take a powder quick.'

Katz shifted the toothpick. 'You're all washed up,' he said. 'You ain't nothin'. Suppose you get wise an' talk? What are you doin' here?'

I shrugged. 'I guess I'll be on my way,' I said, getting to my feet.

Katz said: 'Sit down.' There was a threat in his voice.

'We won't get anywhere,' I said. 'I'm goin'.'

Katz shifted a little, so that his back was against the door. 'Don't start anythin',' he said. 'I ain't ready to plug you yet, but don't rush me.'

I said: 'You better get out of the way.' I was getting mad with this gunman. I guessed he'd think twice about letting the gun off. After all, we were on a main street, and guns can make a noise.

Maybe Katz gave Blondie a signal, or maybe she acted on her own initiative. I had been keeping my eyes on the gun, making up my mind whether I could jump Katz or not, and for a moment she was out of the picture. Well, I deserved what came to me, because I had had a taste of her before.

Something hard and heavy hit me on the side of my head, and I went down on my knees. The room tilted and the lights began to spin.

Dimly I heard Katz say: 'Don't hit him again. . . . I wantta talk to this bird.'

Someone grabbed my arms and twisted them behind me and a hard, cold strap bit into my wrists. I felt myself tossed on the bed. My head cleared and I struggled to sit up, but a hand, out of the mists, closed over my face and slammed me back on the pillow. I lay still until I could focus the lights properly, then I raised my head cautiously and looked at them. They stood at the end of the bed, watching me.

Blondie had her arms crossed over her breasts. Her face was indifferent, but her eyes smouldered. Katz chewed the toothpick and held the automatic loosely.

Without taking his eyes off me, he said to Blondie: 'What's it all about?'

'He's crazy. He came up here an' said I'd taken five grand off him.'

Katz shrugged. 'Well, didn't you?' he said. He moved round the bed and sat down close to me. 'Listen, punk,' he went on, 'I'm goin' to tell you somethin' . . . then you're goin' to tell me somethin'. We've got your jack all right. Blondie lifted it, like you thought she did. . . .'

Blondie made a move forward. 'What the hel. . . .' she began.

Katz turned his head. 'Shut up,' he said. 'I'm handlin' this. I want this guy to know where he gets off.'

He turned his head back to me. 'We've been watchin' you for some time. You went to Vessi's bump-off, didn't you?'

I said: 'What of it?' It struck me that if this guy talked enough, I might learn something.

'We're interested to find who sent you . . . get this right, we don't care about you . . . we just want to find who's paying you; get it?'

I looked at Blondie. I was getting a little of the angle. 'I thought you were Vessi's side-kick,' I said. 'I see I'm wrong. Vessi was framed, an' you know it. This guy's no pal of Vessi's . . . what the hell are you playin' ball with him for?'

Blondie said viciously: 'You lay off that. Who sent you that five grand . . . that's what you gotta tell us.'

I shook my head. 'I can't tell you that . . . I don't know myself. I just got a note offerin' me five grand to bust the frame-up open, an' I was interested. I went along to see Vessi die. . . . I didn't learn anythin', and the five grand turned up to encourage me, an' you knocked it off. That's the history as far as I'm concerned.'

I was careful not to tell them I had my instructions by 'phone, because I didn't want to give them a lead that it was a woman. I reckoned I'd given them just enough information without telling them more than they knew.

Katz scratched his jaw with his thumbnail. 'That all?' he said.

I nodded.

Blondie said suddenly: 'What the hell's the matter with you, Earl? Why don't you rough this guy around. You won't get anywhere talkin' soft to him.'

Do you get the idea now? This dame was real poison ivy. I said quickly: 'What more do you want me to say? I can't tell you somethin' I don't know.'

Katz still sat there scratching his chin with his thumbnail. He kept his eyes fixed on my face, and I don't mind telling you that I didn't like the look in his eye. This guy was as tough as Blondie, only in a different way. He wasn't all wind. When he started something, you'd know about it all right.

He said at last: 'Okay, I guess you can beat it. You better keep clear of this place. You won't find that five grand, an' you'd better not go to the cops about it . . . get it?'

Blondie pushed forward. 'You're crazy,' she said. 'Look what this heel's done to me. You ain't lettin' him get away with that?'

A sudden flash jumped into Katz's eyes. He looked mean. 'Listen, Roundheels,' he said, 'You lay off. I'm handlin' this . . . so shut your trap.'

Blondie stepped away, shrugged, and walked into the bathroom. Katz watched her go and then turned back to me. 'She's mad with you,' he said, chasing holes in his teeth with the pick. 'I'd watch my step with her. Once she gets mad with a guy, she stays mad.'

Katz leant against the chest of drawers. He still held the automatic limply at his side. 'Take my tip, bozo,' he said, looking at me from under his hat, 'you lay off this Vessi business . . . it ain't healthy. We don't want to get a guy like you into trouble. We know all about you. You ain't bad. The boys think you're an all-right guy. Okay, that suits me, but stay an all-right guy.'

I raised my head and shot him a look. 'Meanin'?'

'Just forget about Vessi, an' go on with your pen-pushin'. Forget about everythin' an' forget you ever seen me or Blondie.'

'Suppose I don't; what happens then?'

'Well, things happen, you know. The guys who run this show are big guys. They could make a smear of you if they wanted to. They could run you outta town. They could turn on the heat. Yeah, I guess plenty would happen.'

I scratched my head. 'You sure got this thing worked out,' I said. 'I guess I'd better think it over.' I got to my feet and hunted around for my hat. I found it lying by the door. Someone had trodden on it. I stood there working it into shape. 'You better kiss Blondie good night for me . . . I don't think I could trust myself to do it.'

Katz compressed his lips. He didn't seem to think much of my humour. 'Sure,' he said, 'I'll tell her you've gone.'

I opened the door and took a step on to the landing. 'I guess I'll see you some time,' I said, and pulled the door to.

I wanted a drink badly. My nose was feeling like hell, and my right eye was beginning to close. I thought a stiff drink might set me up.

When I got into the street I walked rapidly to the end of the block, hailed a taxi and directed him to a bar near my apartment.

I was glad the bar was empty. The barman gave me a long look, but he didn't say anything. After the second bourbon I began to feel better. I had a third and took that one more slowly.

My mouth was feeling sore, but I lit a cigarette and held it in my lips without much trouble. Fighting dames was going to be struck off my list of hobbies.

Although I hadn't got my five grand, I had learnt a lot. It looked to me that Vessi had been properly double-crossed. If his girl friend had joined the other side, he'd had a raw deal all round. It was over Blondie that the shooting was supposed to have happened. Maybe they had given her enough dough to fix the trial. I would have a look into this angle. Then I paused. Or should I? This guy Katz was dangerous, and I was bucking a big outfit. Was it worth going on? What had I got out of it up to now? I felt my nose and eye thoughtfully.

Unless I found out something good that would blow the lid off this business quickly, I was going to run into trouble. I ordered a fourth bourbon. Suppose I left it alone? Okay, I'd still be right where I was, and maybe I'd be a lot better off.

With the bourbon inside me, I decided definitely to go home and forget all about it. Then I suddenly thought of Mardi. When I thought of her, I felt good. Now that was my idea of a swell girl. She'd got everything. I told myself that tomorrow I'd take her out to lunch. I could do with a lot of her company.

I didn't take long to get to my apartment. As I let myself in the telephone began to whirr. I hesitated before answering it. The bourbon had made me feel fine, and I didn't want any more trouble for tonight. Anyway, I answered it.

'Nick Mason?'

It was that dame again. I sat on the edge of the table. 'Yeah,' I said.

'I sent you—'

'I know,' I broke in. 'I've had a swell time since you sent me that five grand. You don't know what you've been leadin' me into, baby. First Vessi's old moll steals the five grand. Then I go round and see her an' we have a hell of a scrap, that's nearly ruined me. Then Katz, Spencer's gunman, turns up and points a rod at me, and tells me to lay off or else. . . .'

I grinned a little at the sudden silence at the end of the 'phone. I guessed that had certainly given her something to hold.

'An' what is more, baby, I'm through . . . I ain't interested any more, so forget all about it, will you?'

'So you are not interested any more?' Her voice was very cold.

'You've got it right the very first time,' I said.

There was a short pause, then she said: 'But you will be, Mr. Mason . . . believe me, you will be very interested before long,' and she hung up.

Just like that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE first thing I did when I woke was to inspect the damage Blondie had done to me. I looked like hell. My nose was about twice its usual size and my right eye was closed. I looked like I'd been pushing Joe Louis around.

I went back to bed, plenty mad. With a wrecked pan like this I had to wash out taking Mardi to lunch. I couldn't expect to put my stuff across, looking the ruin I was.

I lit a cigarette and thought over my troubles. If Mardi and me were married it wouldn't matter a hoot how many black eyes I had. In fact, she would be running around fixing me up and fussing me. As soon as that thought filtered through my brain I sat up with a jerk. I was crazy. Me, getting married. That was a laugh. Me, the guy who ribbed the boys who got hooked. Taking one dame on for the rest of my days was one mistake I'd promised myself never to make. And here I was, lying in bed, pondering how nice it would be.

I got out of bed and grabbed myself a drink. I told myself I'd better take some exercise or something; I was losing my grip.

I'd just finished my shower and rinsed off the shaving-soap when the front-door bell whirred violently. Slipping on my dressing-gown, I opened up.

Ackie was standing there, his eyes glittering with suppressed excitement. 'H'yah,' he said, pushing his way in. His eye spotted the half-pint standing on the mantelpiece and he went straight across and sunk half of it.

'Finish it up,' I said dryly from the door, 'don't mind me.'

Ackie shook his head and put the bottle back. 'Never drink in the mornin',' he said. 'Pity . . . that ain't bad liquor.'

I said: 'Come into the bedroom while I finish dressing.'

He followed me in and sat on the edge of the bed.

'What's the excitement?' I asked, pulling on my shirt.

'I gotta job—' He broke off and gaped at me. 'Hi!' he exclaimed, his eyes popping, 'what the hell's matter with your face?'

I shrugged. 'Got into a little scrap last night,' I said carelessly. Tell Ackie that a dame had done this? Not a chance! The boys would rib me to death.

Ackie still stared. 'Huh,' he said, 'gettin' tough, eh?'

'You should have seen the other guys,' I said, knotting my tie carefully in the mirror. 'Three great hoodlums set on me—'

'I know . . . I know. . . .' Ackie grinned. 'And you beat hell out of 'em all. Yeah! You don't have to tell me.'

'I ain't goin' to waste time tellin' you anythin' if you ain't goin' to believe it,' I said.

'Okay, then don't, 'cos I won't.'

I shoved my legs into my trousers. 'Gettin' back to the point. What's the excitement?'

Ackie stiffened up, as if he suddenly remembered an urgent job. 'Yeah,' he said, 'I got somethin' for you. How'd you like to pick up a hundred bucks?'

I put on my coat and fixed my hair. Ackie giving away a hundred bucks was someone I didn't know. 'Doin' what?'

'You know Colonel Kennedy?'

I turned my head and looked hard at Ackie, but his face was blank. 'You don't have to ask that; you know I do.'

'Pretty thick with him, ain't you?'

'Come on, come on.' I stood over him. 'What is this? What's Kennedy got to do with it?'

'Listen, Nick, we're in a jam. We gotta see this guy, an' we gotta talk to him.'

This sounded screwy to me. I sat on the table. 'Why come an' see me?'

Ackie fidgeted. 'Well, this guy's being difficult, see? He won't see anyone. We reckoned you could talk to him.'

My instinct told me that there was a story hanging to this. A story that might be big. Colonel Kennedy was one of those rich playboys with so much dough that he never found time to finish counting it. The kind of guy who gives away a couple of million and doesn't have his bank manager running round in circles.

Some time ago I helped this guy out of a jam. He was running in a yachting race with a nickel cup hanging to it. He could have bought up the whole cup factory if he'd wanted to, but no, he had to go out in a rough sea and try and win it. Just before the gun went, his crew broke his arm. There was Kennedy hopping mad because he thought the cup was escaping him.

Well, I was around and I offered to help him out. Somehow or other we got home first, and that guy was tickled to death.

Doing Kennedy a favour meant something. For the first month I was nearly smothered with the things he used to send me. After four weeks of it I couldn't stand any more, so I changed my apartment and got under cover. Now here was Ackie asking me to go through it all over again.

'You'd better tell me the whole story,' I said, 'I ain't movin' without it.'

Ackie groaned. 'Listen, Bud,' he said earnestly, 'this has gotta be done quick. Suppose you come with me an' let me tell you as we go.'

'Go? Where?'

'The Colonel's up at his fishing-place. You know where that is.'

I knew Kennedy had a retreat in the hills where he used to go when he wanted to get away from people. It was sixty or seventy miles out of town. I'd never been there, but I'd heard a lot about it. I was too much the newspaper man to waste time talking, so I grabbed my hat and what was left of the half-pint and went downstairs with Ackie. He'd got a big Packard outside, with two of the boys sitting in front. One of them nursed a camera complete with flashlight on his lap. They grinned at me as I got into the back with Ackie.

The way that Packard shot away from the kerb was nobody's business.

I lit a cigarette and settled down in the corner. There was plenty of room in the car and the springs were swell. 'You do yourself well,' I said, bouncing a little to test the springs.

'Official car,' Ackie said. 'This is somethin' big, Nick. The old man himself told me to get you.'

'Suppose you let me have it,' I said.

Ackie looked worried. 'I don't know what the hell it's about,' he said. 'As far as we know, a servant at the lodge 'phoned the police around twelve o'clock this morning and reported hearing a shot fired downstairs in the front room. She was too scared to go down an' investigate. Well, the cops went out there and spent a little while inside. I guess we'd never have heard of the business only one of our boys was at the desk when the call came through. He tipped the night editor, who thought it big enough to send someone up.

'Well, they sent Hackenschmidt and he gets nowhere. He 'phones for help and a wagon-load of boys go up. I guess they know Kennedy and hoped for free drinks all round, but Kennedy doesn't show up. We ring him up and he answers the telephone, but as soon as we start askin' questions he hangs up quick. The old man gets mad because Kennedy's news, an' he sends for me. I waste an hour tryin' to get in, but don't get to the first base. The old man then says for me to get you ... quick.'

I rubbed my nose thoughtfully. 'What do the cops say?'

Ackie shrugged. 'Kennedy's slipped 'em plenty. They say the maid was screwy an' nothin' has happened.'

I laughed. 'You'd look mighty sick if it were true,' I said.

Ackie shook his head. 'There's somethin' phoney goin' on, an' whatever it is is news. So you're bein' paid a hundred bucks to get in an' find out just what.'

A hundred bucks! That was a laugh! If I got in there and there was something hanging to this, it was going to cost the *Globe* a lot more than a hundred bucks.

I said: 'Maybe I shan't get in.'

Ackie's eyes opened wide. 'You gotta get in,' he said, 'the old man's ravin' mad now. You just gotta get in.'

I love a situation like that. A big newspaper begging you to do something. That always means dough, and lots of it.

'Okay,' I said, taking the Scotch out of my pocket. Ackie fixed his eyes on it. I didn't leave him much.

We did that trip under a hundred and fifty minutes. I was glad when they pulled the car to a standstill. Driving like that without any breakfast didn't do me any good.

Kennedy had got a swell place, make no mistake about that. The lodge was hidden from the main road by a big belt of giant trees. The surrounding country was wild and woody. Not far from the lodge a swift river about a hundred yards wide flowed strongly, twisting through the woods like a snake.

It was the sort of place I would have bought myself if I had the dough. The sort of place Mardi and me would be happy in. Even with a big story breaking I kept linking myself with that girl.

We piled out of the car and began to walk up the narrow, wooded path that led to the lodge. We hadn't gone far before we heard voices.

Ackie grinned a little. 'The boys've camped out here,' he said.

He was right. We turned the sharp bend in the path and suddenly came upon the lodge and the boys. There must have been eight or nine of them hanging round the lodge, watching the windows, smoking and talking.

When they saw us they came towards us hurriedly.

Barry Hughson greeted me with an ironic cheer. 'Jeeze,' he said, 'you here again!'

Ackie scowled at him. 'The old man sent out an SOS. You watch your step . . . this guy's a big shot.'

Hughson started to say something, but stopped. Maybe he thought it would be wise to quit ribbing me.

'We ain't seen a sign of anyone,' he said. 'We got the place surrounded, and we've tried getting in, but short of smashin' a window we don't stand a chance.'

'You nuts?' I demanded. 'This is goin' to make the Colonel as sore as hell. What do you think you're playin' at?'

Hughson shrugged. 'We got to get the dope,' he said. 'The cops won't spill it . . . there's somethin' goin' on inside there, an' our public want to know.'

We all had a laugh at that.

'Listen, Nick,' Ackie said quickly. 'Suppose you have a shot at it. You get in there an' find out what it's all about . . . then, if you can, persuade the Colonel to let the boys in . . . tell him he's news. We gotta see him!'

If I could get in I should certainly line up with Kennedy. I had no sympathy with headline hunters. I was always on the look-out for a good story, but this way of getting it didn't appeal to me.

'Call your dogs off,' I said to Hughson. 'I shan't get in unless you boys are out of sight.'

They were so eager to get that story they'd've jumped into the river if I'd told them to.

When they had all got under cover, away from the lodge, I walked up to the front door. I took a slip of paper out of my notebook and scribbled on it: '*Maybe I can help you out of this. Nick Mason.*' I rang the bell and shoved the letter through the box.

I stood there waiting. I waited so long that I thought I wasn't going to pull it off. Then I thought maybe Kennedy was thinking it was phoney, so I stood away from the lodge so he could see me.

That worked it. He came to the door himself. I expected to find him plenty mad. I knew he'd got a hell of a temper once he got going.

'Come in, quick,' he said, holding the door ajar.

I stepped into the hall and he shut and bolted the door behind me.

'Am I glad to see you,' he said, wringing my hand. 'Where the blazes have you been all this time?'

I grinned at him. 'Suppose we skip that for a moment, Colonel,' I said. 'Seems like you've got yourself in a bit of a jam.'

'Jam?' He certainly looked worried sick. 'I'm sitting on dynamite. Listen, Mason, are you going to help me out again?'

'Sure,' I said. 'That's why I've come out here.'

'Come in and have a drink,' he said, leading the way into a long, low room, with a big, empty fireplace at one end. I looked round admiringly.

'You certainly've got a swell joint here,' I said.

He was busy fixing the Scotch. 'How did you hear about this?' he asked.

'The *Globe* knew that we had been sort of friendly, and they thought maybe I could get in and find out what the trouble was about,' I said, taking the glass from his hand. 'They figured that you would talk to me.'

Just for a second he stared at me, then he grinned. 'So you came out to fool them?'

I nodded. 'Sure, I came out to fool them.'

The Scotch went down very well indeed.

He sat down in a big armchair and ran his hand through his hair. He was a distinguished-looking guy, with a big, fleshy face and good eyes. I should think he was getting on for fifty, but he was tough and as hard as teak. He pointed to another chair. 'Sit down, Mason, and tell me how you're going to get me out of this.'

I sat on the table so I could look down on him. 'I guess you gotta start talkin' first,' I said. 'I gotta find out just how things are. All I know is a shot was reported and the cops came up. After a little while they came out, told the boys there was nothing to it, and beat it. If the cops were satisfied, I guess there ain't anythin' to get worried about. You ain't just bein' cussed, are you, Colonel?'

Kennedy took a long pull at his glass. 'It's worse than anything like that,' he said. 'It's a woman.'

I hid a little grin. The Colonel was a good guy, but he'd got a way of making dames fall for him. He didn't do much to encourage them. He just sat around and smiled, and along they'd come.

'Huh, huh,' I said. I wasn't going to commit myself.

He finished up the Scotch, fidgeted with the glass, and scowled out of the window at the boys sitting on the grass about two hundred yards away. I didn't hurry him.

'You know how it is,' he began, still looking out of the window.

'Sure,' I said to encourage him.

'I was crazy to have anything to do with this woman,' he said. 'She's got big connections. There'll be a devil of a scandal if anything leaks out, and she can't afford that, nor can I.'

I took his glass and mine and filled them up. The vices of the upper crust always interested me. I'd got enough inferior complexes for rich folk to think they always did their vices so much better than I did mine. I guess it was just a complex, because I've thought about it a great deal, and I never really could think how they did it better than I, but that was maybe because I hadn't enough imagination.

'I've got to get her out of this place, and I don't know how the blazes I'm going to do it.'

I nearly spilt the liquor. 'You mean she's still here?' I said.

He twisted his head and looked at me. 'Of course she is,' he said, showing a little of his old temper. 'Why do you think I'm sitting here, letting those fellows make a monkey out of me?'

'Okay, Colonel,' I said. 'I didn't get it. The jam is getting the lady away without the boys seein' her; that it?'

Kennedy nodded. 'Do you think you could do it?' he asked.

I thought about it, then I said: 'Yeah, I guess it would work out all right. The boys want to see you. At the moment they don't think there's a dame in here. Right, what you gotta do is to see them, and while you're holding them with talk I'll get the dame out through the back door.'

Kennedy sat there thinking. I could see he didn't quite like the idea. I could guess why. 'You ain't got to worry about me, Colonel,' I went on. 'I don't make capital out of friends of mine.'

He looked up hastily. 'No – *I* wasn't thinking of that. I . . . well, I guess, even you can't know who she is . . . she wouldn't stand for it.'

I said: 'Between you an' me I guess this dame's a little difficult, eh?'

Kennedy nodded. 'She's crazy,' he said. 'Damn it, she pulled a gun on me last night.'

I stared at him. 'Then there was some shootin' goin' on?' I said.

He hesitated. 'Yes,' he said at last. 'There was a misunderstanding. She's got a quick temper and the gun went off.'

I couldn't help it. I laughed. It struck me as mighty funny. 'Wouldn't she fall for your stuff, Colonel?' I said.

For a moment I thought he was going to get mad, then he grinned ruefully. 'For Pete's sake keep this quiet,' he implored me. 'But I guess that's about it.'

I slid off the table. 'Suppose you go an' explain things to her. I reckon we gotta hurry, the boys out there are getting restless.'

He got to his feet, looking worried. 'I hope she'll listen to reason,' he said. He stood there like a schoolboy screwing up his courage to go inside for a belting. Then he walked out of the room.

I let him go, and when I was sure he had gone upstairs I gumshoed to the foot of the stairs and flapped my ears.

I heard his voice. He was putting the problem forward in a low voice. I could just catch a word here and there, but nothing more. There was a moment's silence, then a woman spoke. She just said: 'Very well, if you think it is safe,' but it was not what she said that made me stiffen. It was the voice. I'd know that voice anywhere. The cold, hard, metallic ring in it.

Colonel Kennedy's girl friend was the woman who had called me up twice on the telephone. The woman who had sent me five thousand bucks.

I said, 'Well, well,' to myself and walked slowly back to the big room.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KENNEDY came down again after five minutes or so. He went to the window and looked out, then he turned round to me. 'I've talked to her,' he said uneasily. 'She wants you to get the car ready and have it drawn up outside. Then she's going to make her getaway by herself.'

This didn't suit me. I was looking forward to a long drive with this dame. 'What happens to the car?'

A little frown settled on Kennedy's face. 'You don't have to worry about that,' he said. 'I just want you to do that ... nothing more. Will you do it?' There was a touch of the soldier in his voice.

I said: 'Sure ... anything you say.'

He looked relieved. 'You go and call these fellows in. Once they're in, you go round to the back and get the car out. Then come back here.'

I told myself I was at least going to have a peep at this dame. 'Okay. Shall I start now?'

'Just wait a minute.' He went out into the hall. I heard him call up the stairs. 'Come down now.'

It wasn't possible for me to go to the door and watch because he would have seen me, and I certainly was burnt up to stand there and let that dame get away with it.

I heard someone run down the stairs quickly and walk with clicking heels down the passage. Then Kennedy came back. He nodded to me. 'Fetch 'em in,' he said.

I walked to the front door and flung it open.

The boys came running. They looked like the Klondyke gold rush.

'The Colonel will see you now,' I said. 'Take your hats off, wipe your feet, an' for Gawd's sake behave like gentlemen.'

They crowded past me and barged into the big room. I certainly handed it to Kennedy. He stood at the end of the room, looking at them coldly, not a muscle of his face moving. As soon as the last one had piled himself into the room I quietly shut the door.

I ran down the passage, keeping my eyes open, but I didn't see a sign of her. There were a couple of doors on each side, and she might have been behind either of them, but I couldn't very well look and see.

At the far end of the corridor was a door leading to the back of the grounds. I opened it and looked out cautiously. There was no one about. I hadn't put it past Ackie to leave one of the boys snooping outside. Maybe they didn't think I'd pull it off, and the surprise put it out of their heads.

I ran over to the garage and pulled open the doors. There were two cars. I chose the small one. It didn't take me a moment to run it out facing the exit. Then, leaving the motor running, I hurried back to the lodge.

As I came down the passage, Ackie stepped out of the big room. He was looking suspicious.

'What the hell are you doin'?' he asked.

I kept on coming at him. If that guy could read my thoughts he'd have curled up and busted right away.

'I just had a look outside to see if any of the boys were left out of the prayer meetin',' I said.

Ackie said, 'Oh yeah?' and made to step past me.

I put out an arm and collared him. 'Come on, Mo,' I said. 'I wantta hear what the Colonel's sayin'.'

Ackie stiffened, but he couldn't break my hold.

He said furiously: 'You're double-crossin' me!'

I grinned down at him and walked him away from the back door towards the big room. 'I got you into here to see the Colonel,' I said. 'Well, you're goin' to see the Colonel . . . that's all.'

I heard a door shut behind me. If Ackie hadn't barged in I'd have seen her. I loved Ackie a lot right then. He tried to turn but I still held him tight. I shifted my grip a little and suddenly put on some pressure. He gave a squawk.

'You're breakin' my arm,' he howled.

I said evenly: 'I'd like to break your neck.'

Faintly I heard the door of the car slam and the sudden sound of a car accelerating. Ackie opened his mouth to yell, but I clapped my hand over it.

'Shut up!' I said sharply. 'You start anythin' an' I'll smash you.'

I waited out in the hall until I was sure she'd got away, then I released him.

He stood glaring at me furiously. 'What a pal,' he spluttered. 'Think you're gettin' that hundred? What a laugh.'

'Now listen, Mo,' I said quietly, 'there is more in this than meets the eye . . . you're right. But it ain't the sort of news you can print. If I'd let you go ahead just now your rag would be up to its ears in a libel suit. A libel suit with Kennedy on the wrong side would put your crowd out of business. If you're a good boy and keep your trap shut, I'll give you the inside dope . . . It ain't to be printed, though.'

Ackie could never stay mad for long. He scowled at me, then his face cleared. 'I might have known it,' he grumbled. 'Of all the double-crossin' punks, you are the biggest. All right, I'll keep it quiet. Now what's it all about?'

I lowered my voice. 'Seems like the Colonel got too ambitious. You know what he is with dames. Well, this one wasn't playin', an' what's more she outs with an equalizer an' starts poppin'. This dame is one of the upper crust. Even I don't know who she is. I agreed with Kennedy to smuggle her out while you boys were talkin'.'

Ackie brooded. 'No one got hurt?' he asked bitterly.

I shook my head.

'Hell! There ain't a story at all. Everyone knows about Kennedy an' his women. That ain't news. Pity she didn't drill him. Boy! That would have been a front-page splash!'

I looked at him with distaste. 'Ain't you a nice guy?' I said. 'But now you know. You can see it wasn't worth the fuss.'

Ackie glanced at his watch. 'I guess I'm beatin' it,' he said. 'Maybe I was a little hasty about the hundred bucks. I'll see you get it.'

I grinned: 'Suppose we split it?' I said. 'Send me fifty an' I'll receipt the hundred.'

Ackie nodded. He looked quite happy again. 'You ain't such a bad punk,' he said. 'Maybe you'll play straight one of these days, an' then I'll quite like you.'

The other boys began to crowd out of the room. They looked at us curiously, but Ackie didn't let on. He took them off to the waiting cars.

'You wanta come?' he asked over his shoulder.

I said, 'Sure . . . I ain't got any reason to walk.'

Kennedy appeared at the doorway. 'No,' he said. 'You stay. I want to talk to you.'

I was glad. I liked this guy, and I was getting mighty hungry.

As soon as the last car had driven off, Kennedy came back from the porch and shut the front door. He grinned at me. 'Well, that was a nice bit of work,' he said approvingly. 'You sure pulled me out of a jam. It seems that I'm continually getting into your debt.'

I said hastily, 'Forget it, will you? That sort of talk gives me the itch.'

He laughed. 'I haven't seen you for so long, I guess we got plenty to catch up on. You're going to stay with me for a few days. What do you say?'

I hesitated, but he shook his head. 'You're staying, Mason, so make up your mind.'

I grinned. 'It's okay with me,' I said.

He glanced at the clock. 'Suppose we have some lunch and then I can telephone for my man to pick up some of your things and bring them out here. He's got to bring some of mine, so he may as well make himself useful.'

Lunch was ready by the time we had had a wash and a drink. It was laid out in the suntrap outside: a small verandah, screened by glass, overlooking the river. We sat down to a swell meal.

'You got a grand spot here,' I said, helping myself to lobster salad.

Kennedy nodded. 'It is very convenient,' he said, with a faint smile. 'I don't see people for weeks here. Just the place for relaxation.'

I looked at him quickly. 'I've got another name for it,' I said with a grin.

He laughed. 'You don't look as if you've had much relaxation,' he said. 'What have you been doing with your face?'

That put me in a fix. I wasn't sure how far he might be involved in this business. I said carelessly, 'Oh, I got into a scrap last night.'

We finished our meal and sat there in the sun with a nice cigar and some old brandy, and talked. I said casually, after we had been talking some time, 'I'm thinkin' of buyin' some stock. Can you advise me?'

He began to go through a list of names that didn't mean much to me.

'What about Mackenzie Fabrics?' I shot out.

He looked startled. 'That's funny,' he said, 'I've just been getting rid of some of those myself.'

'What's so funny about it?' I asked, keeping my voice casual.

He shook his head. 'Oh, nothing,' he said shortly, and changed the subject.

I wondered if the dame who'd just gone had anything to do with this. I didn't like to risk asking him outright who she was. These guys, once they've been through the army, have got ideas about mentioning names of women who they've compromised. He might have turned tough, so I shelved it for the moment.

After we had settled our lunch, we went out and had a look at the grounds. The more I saw of the place the more I liked it.

He'd got everything. Even a bathing-pool, cut in the rocks in the thickest part of the wood, and fed by the rushing water of the river.

We spent the next four days fishing, swimming, and lazing about. He and I hit it off together pretty well. The food was good and there was plenty to drink. I'll say this, it was one of the nicest holidays I've spent. There was nothing that guy didn't know about fishing, and with his help I found I wasn't doing too badly myself. We'd go out after breakfast with rods and long waders, and walk slowly into the shallow, fast-moving river and fish. It was a grand way of spending the day.

One evening we were sitting on the verandah in the moonlight, finishing a cigar before turning in. The night was still and hot and we were both pleasantly tired. I was thinking that it was time I got back and did some work, when he looked up suddenly. 'You know, Mason, a guy like you ought to marry and settle down. You'd make more money that way.'

Six months ago a crack like that would have made me laugh, but now I pondered before answering him. 'Yeah,' I said at last, 'I guess there's somethin' in that.'

He was silent for a little while, then he went on, 'When you find the girl, I'm going to give you this place.'

Didn't I tell you this guy smothered me? I sat up sharply.

'You be careful what you're saying,' I said, 'I might take you seriously.'

He smiled a little. 'I reckon it would be a bit heavy for you to carry, anyway,' he said. 'There's a hell of a lot of upkeep that goes with it. But this I will promise you. When you get married, you can use this place as often as you like. I'm getting out pretty soon. I want to go to China. Maybe I'll be away a number of years. So when you're fixed up, let me know.'

I said it was mighty white of him and we let the matter drop. All the same, I kept thinking of Mardi, and I kept thinking what a surprise it would be for her to come here for our honeymoon. I kept thinking about it until I got restless. I told myself that I'd been there too long. My eye and nose were back to normal and I was anxious to get away.

The following morning I broke the news to him. He just grinned. 'I believe you've got a girl, after all,' he said.

I nodded. 'You're right. It's just a matter of fixing things up.' Although I spoke like that, I was wondering how long it would take to get Mardi on the dotted line. Maybe I would come unstuck. Anyway, it was worth a try.

I got back to town the next afternoon. And I rang up the Mackenzie Fabrics right away. 'I want to speak to Miss Mardi Jackson,' I said to the operator.

'Hold on a minute,' she snapped. I heard a faint flopping as she jerked out the plug and connected it somewhere else. Then she came back over the line again. 'Miss Jackson no longer works here,' she said, and cut off.

I put the telephone down very thoughtfully. So Mardi wasn't working any more for the Mackenzie Fabrics. Why? Had she walked out on them, or had they given her the bird? How long had she been gone? I suddenly felt annoyed with myself for staying with Kennedy so long. If I'd phoned her on the day Ackie took me out, I might have caught her.

Now where was I going to find her? I hopefully checked the telephone-book, but she wasn't in that. Maybe she stayed with her people or in a boarding-house. There were about a thousand Jacksons to choose from.

I suddenly remembered that on the day we had first met, Katz had seen us together. Did that mean anything? Had Katz scrammed back to Spencer and told him that I had contacted her? Was that why she no longer worked there? I remembered

Ackie saying that Katz was as dangerous as a rattlesnake, and I began to get a little hot and bothered. Did Mardi know anything? Had they got her out of the way? It was no use sitting around asking myself dumb questions. I'd got to find out.

I grabbed my hat and left my apartment at a run. A taxi took me to the Hoffman Building quickly. I paid him off and checked the time. It would be one o'clock in ten minutes or so. I went into the nearby drug-store and bought myself a drink. The guy behind the counter looked like he might have some brains. After I had finished the Scotch I ordered another.

'I'm lookin' for a dame,' I said confidentially to this guy, as he put the glass on the counter.

'Ain't we all?' he said, putting his elbows on handles of the soda jerker and resting himself.

I said, 'You're right. Maybe you can help me.'

He looked interested. 'Sure,' he said. 'Anythin' I can do.'

'I'm looking for a dame who works at the Mackenzie Fabrics. I've just heard that she's been fired out an' I want to know where she's gone.'

He looked sort of dreamy. 'They've got some swell dames workin' in that joint,' he said wistfully. 'They're high steppers. I can't get to the first base with any of 'em.'

'Do they come in here to eat?' I asked.

'Sure. The rush starts right now.'

I took a five-dollar bill from my vest-pocket and pushed it across to him. 'Suppose you let me know when one of them comes in. If I could get her talkin' maybe I could learn where this dame's gone to.'

He grabbed the fin. 'I'll do that okay,' he said. 'You just sit around.'

A little after one o'clock the place began to fill up. Almost immediately he jerked his head at me. A tall, blonde doll was just settling herself on a stool, preparing to put on the nosebag. She'd got a friendly look about her, and I thought I'd get places with her if I handled her in the right way.

I let her settle down, then I left my place and took the stool next to hers. She was against the wall, so we were more or less isolated from the others.

She glanced at me and then went on packing a club sandwich away. The guy behind the counter came over and gave me one, too. He winked at me, and then took himself off to deal with a rush at the far end of his beat.

I said cautiously, 'You'll pardon me, but I guess you could tell me something about Miss Jackson.'

She jerked round like a virgin at bay. Her eyes popped a little and I thought she was going to get tough. 'What did you say?' she asked.

'I'm looking for Miss Mardi Jackson,' I explained, putting on my best manners. 'I was told you work for the Mackenzie Fabrics, and I thought maybe you could tell me.'

The startled expression died out of her eyes, and she swung herself round on the stool so that she faced me. 'Are you a friend of hers?' she asked.

I took a chance. 'I'm her boy friend,' I said.

'Really? Now isn't that a scream?' she exclaimed. 'You know, I always knew Mardi was deep . . . I told the other girls. . . . Not that they didn't think so themselves . . . you know how it is, don't you? A girl like Mardi ought to have a boy friend . . . it's only natural, isn't it? She never said anything about having one . . . she kept to herself a lot . . . don't think we didn't like her . . . we did. We were all struck in a heap when she left—'

I blinked. 'Listen, lady,' I broke in. 'Maybe you can tell me what happened? I've been away for a few days, an' I've got some news to catch up on.'

'Why, surely.' She was ready to give me the whole set-up. I could see that. The trouble was that when a dame like this once got started, it was difficult to stop her. Anyway, I told myself, I'd got the whole day, so I should worry.

'You go right ahead an' tell me all about it,' I said, lighting a cigarette and giving her one.

Her eyes grew big again. 'Well, I don't know if I ought . . . but you being her boy friend . . . well, it's different, isn't it? I mean to say . . . I wouldn't tell anyone . . . what I mean is I don't go talking about people to anyone. . . . Well, I guess you can read character . . . you can tell that, can't you?'

I said, 'Sure. Don't you worry about that.'

'Well, Mardi came back from lunch about a week ago . . . she seemed all up in the air . . . sort of dreamy . . . and the girls thought she'd been out with her beau or something . . . then Lu calls her in . . . Lu is Mr. Spencer, the big shot of our firm . . . but I expect you'd know that . . . well, Mardi goes in and she stays inside for some time ... then I heard Lu getting mad ... he gets awful mad sometimes .. he shouts and bangs around no end ... well, I thought Mardi was getting into trouble, so I listened outside the door. ... I don't do that ever, really ... you see, Mardi was a friend of mine ... I just thought I'd be there in case Lu got really mad ... but he shouted so much I couldn't hear what he said. Mardi said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Spencer, but it's really my own business who I lunch with," and that made Lu crazy as a bug ... by that time some of the other girls had come and were listening ... Lu says it's okay with him ... but Mardi could pack up and get out ... so she comes out quietly ... you know how like a lady she behaves ... and away she goes. Lu comes out and stands in the doorway and watches her go ... we don't have a chance to say good-bye ... that's all I can tell you.'

I said, 'Haven't you heard from her since?'

She shook her head. 'No ... I just can't make it out. We've all been waiting to hear from her ... but not a word.'

'Do you know where she lives?' I asked.

She wasn't as dumb as I thought she was. Her eyes suddenly hardened. 'Hey!' she said. 'You her boy friend, and you don't know where she lives?'

I saw I'd got to tread carefully here. I took her over the ground gently. 'That may sound phoney to you,' I said, 'but I've only been running around with her for a day or so. You see, I'm crazy about her, but I don't know how she feels about me. I want to go on with this, but I've got to find her first.'

'Isn't that too marvellous?' She looked almost coy. 'Well, I'll help ... I think a girl needs a man ... don't you? Look, I'll write down her address.'

I gave her a pencil and my notebook. She scribbled down an address on the west side of the town, and I put the notebook carefully back in my pocket.

I slid off the stool. 'I'm goin' right away,' I said. 'You've been a swell help. I'll ask you to the wedding.'

I left her at the run, with her mouth open to start all over again. I guess that dame enjoyed her lunch-hour. It certainly had given her something to talk about. And could she talk?

CHAPTER NINE

ALL this didn't get me anywhere. When I got to the address the blonde had given me, Mardi wasn't there. She had left about two days ago, the landlady told me, taken her bags and left no address. Was I pleased?

I returned to my apartment, feeling sore. The only thing I did know was that Mardi had left her job because of me. That told me that Spencer thought she knew something and wasn't risking anything. If what she knew was important, maybe he'd hidden her away. Against that, the landlady had told me that she had come by herself to pack her bags and didn't seem very worried. She did say that she had to go out of town on business, and didn't know when she would return. This was probably an excuse to satisfy the landlady, or was it?

I sat on the table and brooded about it. I wondered if I should find her again by proceeding in the investigation of the Vessi frame-up. While I was thinking about it the telephone rang.

The hard, clear metallic voice floated over the wire. 'Nick Mason?'

I didn't beat about the bush with this baby. 'Yeah,' I said. 'Been shootin' any more colonels?'

I couldn't help grinning a little. I seemed to be always slipping a nasty one in with this dame.

She said, 'You know about that?'

'Sure,' I said. 'I was the guy that got you out of the jam. I recognized your voice.'

There was a moment's silence, then she said, 'You are looking for Mardi Jackson. I told you last time that you would be interested before long. You see, I am not wrong. Mardi Jackson knows too much. I don't think you will see her again. All the same, you might have a look at the Wensdy Wharf tonight at nine o'clock. You might see something there that will interest you further.'

'Why the hell must you be so mysterious . . .' I began, but the line went dead. If I ever caught up with this dame, I thought savagely, slamming the telephone back on the table, I'd give her something to be mysterious about.

All the same, I was alarmed. She had confirmed my suspicions. Mardi did know something. I didn't like that crack about not seeing her again. I wandered round the room restlessly. Who was this woman? Why was she so anxious to get me started on this business? Kennedy knew who she was. I guessed that my next step would be to go along and have a straight talk with him. If I put my cards on the table, maybe he would open up.

In the meantime, I decided to check the morgue, just in case Mardi was there, unidentified.

I was mighty glad to get the job over. I didn't find Mardi. There were a good number of young girls lying on the slabs waiting for someone to claim them, and by the time I got through I was feeling low.

I had a chat with the morgue attendant before going. Casually I asked him if he knew anything about Wensdy Wharf. To my surprise he knew quite a lot about it. His brother used to work close by the place.

'A real tough spot,' he told me. 'No one uses it now. They go farther up river to Hudson's Wharf. You will find all the river rats around Wensdy. Mike . . . that's my brother . . . used to say that Wensdy Wharf was used for smuggling. I guess it's cleaned up a bit since then. All the same, it's a tough spot.'

I got directions from him how to get there, gave him a couple of bucks, and beat it.

The rest of the day I spent sorting out my correspondence and seeing some of the boys. Things were quiet, and there were no big news stories coming in.

Around about eight o'clock I took my battered Ford and drove over to the *Globe* buildings. I went in and found Hughson just preparing to leave.

'H'yah,' he said. 'I never really thanked you for fixing Kennedy for us. It was grand work.'

I waved aside his thanks. 'Know anythin' about Lu Spencer?' I asked.

Hughson shrugged. 'I should forget it,' he said. 'That Vessi busines[illegible]. You won't get anywhere digging around that mud-heap.'

I shook my head. 'No . . . I wasn't lookin' at that angle,' I told him. 'I just wanted to find out the type of guy he was. A girl friend of mine used to work for him and she's disappeared. I wondered if he'd got anything to do with it.'

Hughson shook his head. 'Spencer ain't that sort of a guy. He's got a wife an' he's crazy about her. He wouldn't go two-timin' with one of his workers. Of course, I may be wrong, but I don't think so.'

I offered him a Camel. 'Spencer's a pretty tough bird, ain't he?' I asked.

Hughson shrugged. 'Yeah, I suppose he is. He's smart and he makes dough. Don't you worry your brains about Spencer.'

We went downstairs together and I drove him part-way home. I left him at a convenient subway and drove on towards Wensdy Wharf.

So Spencer was married. I told myself that I'd got to meet this guy soon. I must find Mardi first and hear her story. Then I could go along and talk to Spencer. It seemed I was getting involved in this business, whether I wanted to or not.

Wensdy Wharf was at the far end of the east side of the town. There were some pretty tough quarters to go through to get there. I had to drive carefully, as the roads were narrow and people walked carelessly.

I parked the car at a small garage when I got close to the wharf.

The morgue attendant was right. This place was mighty tough. The streets were narrow and the dark houses seemed to lean forward so that the roofs blotted out the sky above. The pavements were wet and slippery, covered with all sorts of smelly refuse.

The garage hand had told me where I should find Wensdy Wharf. He looked at me as if he thought I was crazy. Maybe I was, but that wasn't going to stop me.

I walked fast. The river mist was coming up slowly, and I could hear the deep note of a distant siren. Soon I left the shops behind and I seemed to be quite close to the river. Turning a corner, I came on Wensdy Wharf. At the far end, I could see the oily water reflecting the light of a solitary street lamp.

On each side of the wharf tall, straggling houses loomed out of the darkness. Yellow chinks of light gleamed from the windows, coming round the ill-fitting blinds. I suddenly felt cold. The mist was damp, and there was a chilly wind coming off the river.

'Well,' I thought, 'here I am.' Wensdy Wharf didn't appeal to me a lot.

I wandered to the edge of the water and looked out across the dark river. But for an occasional tug, with its storm lantern, I could see nothing. I glanced at my watch. It was just after eight-forty-five.

She had said Wensdy Wharf, but that was all. The place was built in a three-sided square with the river for the fourth side. It was easy to watch. I selected a pile of old rope in a dark corner and sat down.

From this point I could keep an eye on the whole of the wharf, and at the same time I was out of sight and in comparative shelter from the wind.

This was not altogether a grand way of spending the evening, but if I was going to find Mardi I wasn't complaining. I was afraid to smoke, and I wanted a drink bad. After ten minutes of this I began to get sore. I thought up a few fancy names to call that dame on the telephone. I'd just like to meet her once. It would only have to be once.

When my watch had told me I'd been there for over thirty minutes, I began to get restless. I got up and paced up and down in the deepest shadows, getting the stiffness out of my bones. Nine-fifteen and nothing had happened. Maybe this dame was taking me for a ride.

Then suddenly things started. I saw the flickering light from a car coming slowly round the corner. Quickly I ducked back behind the coil of rope and knelt down, peering, like they do in the movies, over the top. A big, closed car was nosing itself into the square. The headlights lit up the darkness and blinded me. I kept down until the light swung away from me, then when my corner was once more in darkness I quietly stood up.

The car came to a halt outside one of the houses. This house was in complete darkness. Unlike the others, it showed no lighted windows whatsoever.

I moved cautiously towards it. As I did so two of its doors swung open. A short, thickset man, well muffled up, got out from under the steering-wheel and went to the other door. He leant forward, his head and shoulders disappearing into the car. Then he withdrew himself.

I stiffened. He was holding something. His back was turned, and for the moment I couldn't see what was going on. Then he stepped back and someone else clambered out. They lurched across the pavement. They were carrying someone wrapped up in a coat. Instinctively I knew it was a woman, and it didn't take me a second to surmise that it was Mardi. I was just going to jump forward when two other guys bundled out of the car. This pulled me up quick. It was no use me running into trouble I couldn't handle. Maybe I'd get tossed into the river, and that wasn't going to help Mardi.

They all disappeared into the house, and I heard the door slam to. I stood there waiting. After a few minutes the thick-set guy came out, got into the car, and drove away as silently as he had come. Well, anyway, I told myself, that only left three.

I walked softly to the house and glanced up. A light was now shining from a window on the second floor. Even as I saw it a blind was hastily drawn down, blotting the light out.

I knew which room they had put her in, which was something. I suddenly wished I'd got a gun. The almost eerie feeling from the wharf and the nearness of the river were giving me the heebies. I put out my hand and gently tried the front door. It was locked all right.

I decided to go round the back and see what that looked like. There was a narrow passage running by the side of the house and I went down there cautiously. I had brought a pencil torch with me, and I switched it on as soon as I was hidden from the street. The bright little spot-light lit up the evil-smelling passage. At the end was a rotten wooden fence. I stretched up and looked over. It gave me quite a shock. *The back of the house looked on to the river.*

It didn't take long for a guy with my brains to figure that one out. If they wanted to get rid of Mardi, all they had to do was to kill her and toss her out of the window.

What I had to do was to get into that house quick. If it did mean a little trouble and maybe a little damage, right at this moment Mardi was in a worse fix than anything that could happen to me.

I found a window on the ground floor, and by shining my torch through the glass I could just make out a small, unfurnished room. This would do to get into the house. With the aid of my knife, I jacked up the window. It was stiff, but it went up without any noise. I swung my leg over the sill and stepped into the room. Then I shut the window. You try busting into a dark house with three toughs upstairs, in a vicinity like this, and see how you like it. I didn't. My nerves were jumpy, and my throat was dry as hell.

I gumshoed over to the door and turned the handle. The door came to me as I pulled on it gently. It creaked a little, but not badly. Outside was dark, and I stood listening. I couldn't hear a thing. Cautiously I edged out into a passage, flicked on my torch to get my bearings, and shut the door behind me. On my right was a narrow staircase.

I started up, testing each step before putting my whole weight on it. It was as well I did. Some of those stairs were mighty rotten and they creaked like hell.

I was half-way up when I heard a door open on the next landing, and a sudden flood of light lit up the staircase. Someone came out and shut the door. Once more the staircase went black. Footsteps began to shuffle to the head of the stairs. I stood against the wall. If this guy put on a light, I was sunk. Down he came. I could hear his hand sliding on the banister rail. I squeezed myself farther into the wall. He went past me. I felt the tail of his coat brush past my knees. I let him get one stair down, then I swivelled round quick and kicked out hard with my right foot.

It was a nice kick. At that range it would have staggered an elephant. I felt my toecap sink into something hard, heard a strangled gasp and then a fearful crash. I didn't wait a second, but flashing on my torch I tore up the stairs, three at a time.

As soon as I reached the next landing I turned off the lamp and stood against the wall. Before I did so I caught a glimpse of a door near the head of the staircase. Just as I got away from it, the door jerked open. A thin guy with a black hat crushed on his head stepped on to the landing.

'Hey, Joe,' he called, peering down over the banisters. 'What the hell you playin' at?'

When a guy leans over a rail like that, there is only one thing to do. I did it. Moving fast, I hooked my fingers under his trouser legs and heaved. Although he was thin he was heavy, but I'd put enough steam into my heave to launch him okay. Away he went with a startled howl.

After that I didn't get anywhere. A hoarse voice said behind me, 'Hold the pose . . . ex-actly like that.'

I had visions of a gun covering my back, but for all that I turned my head. The gun was there all right. The guy who was holding it looked mean. He was short and fat with close-cropped white hair. By the way he held the gun, I could see he knew how to use it.

'Okay,' I said quickly, 'I'll be good.'

'Come away from there, lug,' he said. He'd got a very hoarse voice, as if his larynx had gone back on him. 'Keep your hands up an' don't start any funny business.'

While this was going on a lot of noise was coming from downstairs. I've heard bad words in my time, but what came floating up from the darkness was enough to set the river on fire.

The fat guy said, 'Stand with your mug against the wall. I'll drill you if you make a wrong move. Don't let me tell you twice.'

I did as I was told. It struck me that maybe I was in for a bad time. My only hope was that I'd put those other two out of action.

'You hurt, Gus?' the fat guy croaked, not taking his eyes off me. 'Come on up . . . I've got the punk here.'

The only reply to this was another flow of blasphemy. That guy down there certainly knew all the bad words. The fat guy was in a spot. He didn't like to detach himself from me, but at the same time I guess he was itching to get down there and find out if the other two were badly hurt. There was only one obvious thing for him to do, and it didn't take him long to work it out for himself.

Although I was expecting it, I didn't expect a guy of his size to move so quickly. I managed to get my head rolling, but I didn't get started fast enough. The butt of his gun bounced on my head, and I slipped off the rim of the world.

CHAPTER TEN

FAINTLY, in some bottomless pit, I could hear a woman screaming. I didn't care much, until the screams got louder, then I wished she would stop.

I opened my eyes and looked round. The flickering light of a candle that seemed to be floating above my head worried me, and I shut my eyes again. The woman who had been screaming had stopped. I thought that was a good thing. I tried to move my hands, but I found I was unable to do so. I began to take an interest in myself.

I opened my eyes again. Then I remembered. It was like having a pail of water tossed in my face. I tried to sit up, but they'd tied me. My head ached, but every second it was getting clearer. I always did say my skull was tough.

I was lying on the floor with my hands knotted behind my back with some thin twine that cut into my wrists. It hurt like hell.

Above me a solitary candle burnt. It was stuck on the mantelshelf, and its light sent dancing shadows round the room.

Cautiously I pulled myself up into a sitting position. The blood drummed in my head and I had to shut my eyes and take it easy for a bit. Then I got on to my knees and climbed to my feet. They hadn't tied my legs. I took a few steps up and down the room, to get my circulation working. In a minute or two, but for a headache, I was feeling fine.

Just then the door opened and the tall, thin guy walked in. He came in with a little limp, and he stood just inside the door and looked at me.

'H'yah, Gus,' I said, 'I thought you'd broken your neck.'

In the flickering light Gus would scare most people. He'd got a completely flat face with small eyes and a little screwed-up mouth. The bones of his face seemed to be doing their best to burst through his lead-coloured skin. The bridge of his nose had been surgically removed.

He came into the room and shut the door. He shut the door very slowly and deliberately. I had a feeling that he and I were not going to hit it off.

He said, 'I've got a way with wise guys.' His voice had the whine of a run-down gramophone. 'You won't be so snotty when I've been through you.'

I moved slowly away from him. 'Now don't do anythin' your ma wouldn't like to hear about,' I said. 'Suppose you an' I talk things over.'

I was putting a lot of pressure on that twine, but it was so thin that it threatened to cut right through my wrists.

He followed me right across the room, until my back came against the wall with a little jar. I could just make out a little grin on his face as he swung at me.

I timed the blow and shifted my head. His fist sailed past, scraping my ear. His left followed that, but I twisted and took it on my shoulder. For a thin, miserable-looking guy, he'd got plenty of steam in his punches. I knew I wasn't going to keep this up for long.

Along came his right again, moving like a steam pile for the centre of my face. I bent my knee and dropped my head on to my chest. His fist parted my hair. Then I came up quickly, and dug my knee in his stomach. Can you tie that? This punk let me give him one like that.

He made a row like a deflated tyre and went over backwards. I wasn't going to sit around and nurse him. Stepping back, I took careful aim and kicked him on the side of his head as hard as I could. Over he went, his arms flung wide. That kick was a good one. He stayed right where he was.

I stood over him to hand him some more, but he was past caring about me. When I was sure he was out for keeps, I pulled my hands under me and stepped through my wrists, bringing my hands in front of me, instead of at the back. I examined the twine carefully. I looked at the candle and decided to have a try. I burnt myself once or twice, but I got free. The twine snapped after the third application to the flame. I rubbed the life back into my wrists and scratched the back of my head.

On the face of it, it looked like I'd only got the fat guy to worry about. I knelt beside Gus and went through his pockets. I should have felt a lot easier if I could have turned up a gun. But I didn't find one.

Having made sure, I stood up and walked softly to the door. I reckoned that I could take the fat guy on if I surprised him. I found I still had my torch. Moving softly, I slid out into the passage. I stood there listening. If I'd got my bearings right, Mardi should be behind the door on the far end of the passage. I walked quietly down and listened.

Just as I had my head almost touching the door, a sudden wild scream made me jerk back.

I almost burst in, but stopped myself in time. The idea was to get the fat guy to come out to me. I raised my hand and rapped on the door sharply. Then I stepped away to the head of the stairs and flattened myself against the wall. The passage had a sharp bend, so I was fairly under cover.

There was a moment's silence, then a light appeared. I crouched down to afford as small a target as possible, and prepared for trouble.

Nothing happened. I went lower still and moved a little to the bend. I wasn't risking anything, so I just stretched my ears. I could hear the fat guy wheezing. He, too, must have been listening, and wondering what it was all about. 'Gus?' he croaked. 'That you, Gus?' He sounded like he was scared.

I let the silence worry him. He came out into the passage and stood just outside the door. The light was behind him. By keeping close to the wall and peering round the bend, I could just see him; at the same time I was out of his sight.

He raised his voice. 'Gus,' he shouted, 'I want you.'

I very softly tapped on the ground with the butt of my torch. I made just enough noise for him to think he'd heard something, but not enough for him to be sure. I could see him cock his head, then with a grunt he moved towards me. I waited for him patiently, my muscles tense. Just when I was sure I'd get him, he stopped and stepped back. Maybe his good angel had tapped him on his shoulder. He went back into the room quick and shut the door.

Was I pleased! I couldn't afford to wait any longer. I told myself I had to go on in there and chance getting into trouble.

Just as I was getting set, I heard the sound of a bell ringing somewhere in the house. That stopped me. I beat it down the passage quick to the room where I had left Gus. He was still lying on his back, dreaming sweet dreams.

The bell rang again impatiently. This was serious. If more of the boys were arriving, it looked like I was in for a siege. I stood by the door, listening. The fat guy finally made up his mind to make the trip. I heard him open his door and step into the passage. I could see the flicker of a torch coming slowly along.

Would he look in and see if all was well here? If he did, I should have to start something. If he didn't and went downstairs, it might give me enough time to get in that front room and see what was going on in there.

While I was thinking this out, he decided things for me. I saw the handle of the door suddenly move, and I knew he was going to have a look. I had no time to clear Gus out of the way. He lay in full view in the light of the candle. I stepped hastily behind the door and waited. The door opened softly and the fat guy put his head round. It would have been funny if I hadn't been in such a jam. He just stuck his head round the door and his eyes lighted on Gus.

I didn't give him a chance to get set. I flung my weight on the panel of the door, crushing his head. He looked like a side-show. His eyes popped and they rolled round until they lit on me.

'Relax, brother,' I said, and hit him on his chin with a nice round-house swing that had everything I'd got packed into it.

The punch connected on his button with a crisp click. The jar of the blow ran right up my arm and I lost most of the skin off my knuckles. His eyes went blank and I slackened my weight on the door; down he went like a stricken elephant.

I jerked the door open and stepped over him. The bell rang again furiously, and someone began to drum on the door. I ran my hands over him and found his gun. It was a .45 Smith & Wesson. A nice argument in any rough-house.

Boy! Did that gun feel good in my hand!

The hammering and ringing off stage packed up suddenly. That meant they were nervous of waking up the neighbourhood and were going to get in through a window. I didn't kid myself that they would go home.

I dived out into the passage and burst into the other room. Now I was expecting to find Mardi there. I already had visions of being quite the hero in her eyes. I went so far as to imagine that she would sink into my arms, so it set me back a long way when I saw Blondie sitting there.

Blondie? Can you tie that? There she was, tied hand and foot to a chair. Her eyes were brooding sudden death and her general expression like a tigress about to start something.

I stopped in my tracks. 'Well, for the love of Mike!' I said.

She was as startled as I was. 'Get me out of here,' she said hoarsely.

It was when she spoke that I saw she had been having a bad time.

I went behind her and sawed through the twine with my knife. 'This gets me,' I told her as I worked. 'I've been knocking guys all over the house an' riskin' my skin because I thought I was helping a girl friend of mine . . . now I find it's you.'

She didn't say anything, but the way her breath whistled through her nose told me she was plenty mad.

I had to move quickly. I just didn't know how long those guys downstairs would be before they walked in on us. As soon as I had got rid of the twine, I jumped to the door.

'Get a little life into your limbs,' I said to her as I went. 'We gotta get out of here quick.'

I gumshoed to the head of the stairs and looked over. There were two guys coming up. They must have heard me, because they snapped out their light quickly. I swung the .45 and fired one shot, making sure that I didn't hit them.

The way those two fell downstairs to get out of the way made me laugh. I shouted down to them, 'Don't come up. I want to be alone.'

Then I beetled back to Blondie very quietly. She was standing up rubbing her wrists. Her mouth was set in a thin line. That dame didn't look scared, she was just mad.

'Next floor,' I said briefly. 'As quiet as you like.'

She took a few hobbling steps forward and then she stopped. She began to curse. I hastily grabbed her arm. 'Pipe down,' I said. 'What's up? Are you hurt?'

She tried to move forward again, but stopped once more. Her big white teeth chewed her lip. 'I can't make it,' she said jerkily.

I didn't bother to argue, time was pressing. I gave her the fireman's hoist and started up the other flight of stairs. Carrying a dame of Blondie's build up thirty stairs is hard labour, Along with the feeling that some guy is going to open up with a popgun and perforate your pants it's plain hell. By the time I got on to the next landing, I was sweating hard.

Once I got up there, I used my lamp. The landing was similar to the downstairs one. The same number of doors. I entered the back room and dumped Blondie down on the floor. 'Try an' snap out of it,' I said. 'We ain't home yet.'

I went out on to the landing again, leaving her the lamp. Then I leant over the rail and fired a shot down into the darkness. I thought maybe those guys down there wanted a little scare. I got one myself. A gun exploded out of the darkness and I felt the wind of the bullet close to my face. I jerked back, then shifting my position I fired once more, this time straight down the stairs.

Two guns replied, and if I hadn't been lying flat on my face I should have stopped something. These guys knew too much about shooting to please me. I crawled into the room and shut the door softly.

Maybe they wouldn't try to rush the place for a little while. I wasn't sure how many slugs I'd got left, and I thought I'd better save what I'd got.

Picking up the torch, I examined the room. The first thing the spot-light fell on was a heavy cupboard. I went across and pulled it from the wall.

Blondie climbed to her feet and moved over to me. Although her face was twisted, I'll say she was game.

'Take it easy,' I said to her. 'I can manage this . . . you nurse yourself.'

Her reply was unprintable. That's the advantage of meeting up with a dame like Blondie. You don't have to worry about your manners. She and I got the cupboard across the room and against the door. It would hold it for a little while.

I went to the window and looked out. Below was the black river. I could just make out the oily reflection from the overcast moon. It looked a hell of a way down.

I turned back. 'Can you swim, sister?' I asked.

'Yeah,' she said, 'but I ain't swimming in these clothes.'

That's a woman!

I lit a cigarette. 'Unless the cops move in . . . it looks like you'll have to,' I said. 'These guys outside mean business.'

She came over to the window and, brushing past me, she looked out. I could smell her scent. She turned round and looked at me. 'It's a long way down,' she said. There was just a faint quaver in her voice.

I told myself that whatever else she was, she'd got plenty of guts. 'Don't you worry about that,' I said. 'You just push yourself off . . . it ain't anythin'. I'll be right behind you. I guess you don't want to face up to the slugs instead, do you?'

She pulled a zip on her dress and stepped out of it. Then she kicked off her shoes. Blondie was the sort of dame that always wears black undies. I could just make out the faint white of her shoulders and that was all.

Three violent reports sounded outside the door and I heard the bullets smack against the wall opposite. Then someone began to heave against the panels. It was time we got going.

'Come on, baby, it's cooler outside,' I said. 'Sit on the sill and hang your legs outside.'

She climbed up and I held her until she was steady, then she sat down, her legs in space. With my hands on each side of her hips, I felt a little shiver run through her. 'Keep your nut,' I said softly in her ear. 'I'll be right after you. Just take a deep breath . . . off you go.'

I shoved her off the sill and leant out to watch her go. Down she went into the darkness and I heard a loud splash. Then I vaulted after her.

Was that water cold? I seemed to go down for hours. Then just when I thought maybe I'd go on for ever, my head broke the surface. I shook the water out of my eyes and looked around for Blondie. I couldn't see her for several seconds, but then at last I made out a bobbing head several yards to my right.

I turned on my side and swam over to her fast.

'H'yah, baby,' I said. 'You all right?'

'Some guy's goin' to pay for this,' she said furiously, 'you see if he don't.'

I had a little grin to myself in the darkness. This dame's temper couldn't be put out even with water.

'Suppose we go home?' I said, swimming along at her side. 'I guess we've done enough for one night.'

Together we swam quietly to the lights on the waterfront.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was tricky work smuggling Blondie into my apartment. If she didn't mind getting herself talked about, I did.

We certainly had all the luck. After swimming around for a little while, we made the waterfront. A docker nearly had a fit when we climbed up the side of the wharf right at his feet. Once he'd got over the shock of seeing Blondie in her wet undies, he extended a helping hand. He took us along to his place and fitted us out with a couple of worn-out suits. We both looked tramps, but we didn't give a damn.

The docker seemed quite content to accept a phoney story I'd made up for his consumption, and when I promised him twenty dollars if he got us a taxi, he couldn't do enough for us. That was how we got home.

Right now, Blondie was lying in the bath soaking her bruises, and I was crouched over the fire with a glass of Scotch in my hand.

I wasn't too keen having Blondie here. She just wouldn't go back to her apartment. There was nothing else to do but to bring her here. I wanted to get her story, and although she didn't say more than three or four words in the taxi . . . and they were bad ones, I had hopes of getting something out of her.

'When you've finished,' I bawled out to her, 'you might remember I'm waiting.'

'All right,' she called back. 'Come and give me a towel and I'll come out.'

I said, 'You can get it yourself. Remember I'm modest, if you ain't.'

She didn't say anything to that, but I heard her climb out of the bath, and after some time she came out wrapped in my woollen dressing-gown. Her eyes were still stormy and her mouth was set in a sullen line. She jerked her head towards the bathroom, and poured herself out three fingers of Scotch.

I went into the bathroom and had a quick one. The hot water did a lot to restore me, and when I came out again I was feeling fine.

Blondie was crouched over the fire. A cigarette dangled from her lips and the Scotch was way down in the bottle.

I sat down close to her and lit a cigarette. We remained like that for several moments. Then I said, 'Maybe you'd like to tell me what happened.'

She twisted round so that she faced me. This dame was tough all right. I guess the street knocks hell out of these women. They've learnt to have no feelings, and to be on the look-out for a double-cross at every step. It is the one weapon they have to protect themselves.

Looking down at her hard face, I could see no redeeming expression. She was a swell-looker, but that didn't get a dame far. If you'd got eyes like granite and a mouth like a trap, I guess the rest of your looks can't even that lot up.

'Listen,' she said evenly. 'You pulled me out of a jam, but you did it because of someone else and not because of me. You an' me have had a little trouble before. I guess we don't mean anythin' to each other. Well, if you're extending sympathy, you can stick it on the wall. I can manage okay without you handing out any grease; get all that?'

Talking with a dame like her was like playing 'handies' with a rattlesnake. There was only one way to talk to a dame who gets like that, so I handed out some of her own stuff.

'I'm not handing you any grease, sister,' I said, 'I haven't any grease to pass on to your type. I save it for those who can appreciate it. I want to know your story. I've got myself mixed up in this business, and I guess, as I pulled you out of a jam, I'm entitled to know something about it. So come off your high horse, cut out the dramatics, and shoot.'

She turned back to the fire. 'I ain't talkin',' she said.

I got up.

'Okay,' I said. 'Beat it . . . go on . . . get the hell out of here . . . blow!'

She stood up. Her face startled and her eyes wide.

'If you ain't outside quick, I'll call the cops an' hand you over. You can guess what the charge'll be . . . an' I'll make it stick.'

She saw she hadn't a leg to stand on. Her sullen face cleared and she laughed. She could look mighty nice when she laughed. 'Okay, darlin',' she said, 'I'll be good.'

'You see how it is,' I said, moving back to the fire, 'I've got you where it's crisp.'

She poured herself out another Scotch. This dame certainly liked her liquor. 'Yes, darlin',' she said, all honey. 'You're the boss.'

'While we're on the subject,' I went on, 'I reckon I've told you before. That "darlin'" of yours gives me a pain. You ain't on business now.'

She came over and put her arms round my neck. 'I could be,' she said, digging down into her box of tricks and putting on a swell act.

It only made me nervous. I got rid of her arms none too gently and pushed her into the chair. 'Relax,' I said. 'I wantta catch up some sleep some time. It's gettin' late.'

For a moment she looked as if she was goin' to get mad again, then she thought better of it.

'Now what's the story behind all this?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'I guess Earl's a little tired of having me around. This is the sort of hint that guy hands out when he wants you to take a powder.'

Not quite right. One of those difficult answers, half-truth and half-lie. If I was going to get anywhere with this dame, I'd got to lead her along carefully.

'Those three thugs work for Katz?'

She nodded. 'That's right.'

'What did they want to know?'

She glanced at me quickly. Once again her lips smiled, but her eyes were suspicious. 'They didn't want to know anythin', darlin',' she said.

'Yeah? Then why did they beat you up?'

The memory of that made her face darken. 'I've told you . . . that's the way he gives out he's tired of you.'

I shrugged. I certainly wasn't getting anywhere on these lines. 'What do you know about Spencer?'

She looked blank. 'Never heard of him.'

If she and Ananias got swopping stories, I'd know who I'd have my money on.

'Ever heard of a girl called Mardi Jackson?'

Again she shook her head. I gave up. She was too tough to get wild with. She would only laugh at me.

'Okay, sister,' I said, getting to my feet. 'I can see you an' I ain't goin' places. Maybe one day you'll think better of it an' give it me straight. I'm hoping it won't be too late for you. Suppose you tell me your plans. I can't keep you here, you know.'

She said, 'I'm leaving this town tomorrow. I want you to go along to my apartment, put some things together for me, and bring them back here. Then I'm off.'

For nerve, this dame was the tops. I was too tired to argue.

'Anythin' you say,' I grunted. 'You'll be comfortable either in here on the couch or in my bed. . . . I don't care which you have, just make up your mind. I'll take the other.'

The following morning was dull and overcast. I got up around eight. It didn't take me long to get to her apartment. A spare key was under the mat. I'd taken the fat guy's .45 along with me. It didn't seem to have suffered from the water, and I had taken care to have cleaned it well. I wasn't going to be surprised by Katz, and I don't mind telling you that I was a bit nervous going into the place.

She had given me a list of the things she wanted. It was not a long list and I was soon through. I then went carefully through the apartment and searched it pretty thoroughly, but I didn't find anything.

After all the excitement, I was no further to finding Mardi. That was getting me steamed up. I had one taste of the type of thug that Spencer employed, and if they were capable of getting tough with Blondie the same methods could be handed out to Mardi.

I was certain that Blondie knew something and they were trying to find out what it was. The fact that she had made up her mind to leave town showed that she was scared. To leave a nice little apartment like this in a hurry, as well as to lose her connections, pointed that she knew that she was on the spot.

I'd never get anything out of her unless she wanted to tell me. She was far too shrewd to be jumped. Now that Mardi was missing, I had to bust this thing open. There was no other way round it.

When I got back to my apartment I found Ackie there. He was sitting on the foot of my bed, talking to Blondie.

I stood in the doorway and glared at him. He looked over his shoulder. 'H'yah, pal,' he said. 'I'm mighty glad I looked in.'

I dumped the suit-case down and glanced over at Blondie. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

'Well, for God's sake,' I said, 'can't you keep out of my place when I'm busy.'

Ackie shook his head. 'You may have to thank me,' he said. 'Don't bother to introduce us, we've already done that.'

'So I see,' I said sourly. 'You might keep your trap shut about this . . . I don't want the whole town talkin'.'

Ackie grinned. 'Hear that?' he said to Blondie. 'You'd think he was a saint, wouldn't you?'

Blondie liked to see me getting fussed. 'He ain't no saint,' she said, bringing her arms and shoulders into view.

'Come on, Buddy,' I said, 'you an' me will have a little talk outside. The lady wants to get up.'

He was obviously reluctant to go, but I got him outside at last.

'Well, well,' he said with a leer, 'I shouldn't have thought it of you.'

I was pardonably annoyed. 'I can't explain just now,' I said heatedly. 'But for Gawd's sake keep your trap shut about this. You recognize that dame?'

Ackie screwed up his face thoughtfully. 'Yeah,' he said, 'I know her all right. I suppose you're still chasing up the Vessi affair. Well, I guess you're having a swell time doin' it.'

'Suppose you tell me what you want bustin' in like this?'

He thought for a moment, then his face brightened. 'You know, I'd forgotten all about it. When I walked into your bedroom and found that dame in your bed, I certainly had a shock. Yeah, now about tonight. The boys are throwing a little party down at Hughson's place. I thought maybe you'd like to come with me. It's as well to meet the boys every now and then, what do you say?'

To get rid of him, I'd've agreed to anything. 'Sure,' I said, 'that's grand. Suppose you pick me up, and we'll go along together.'

I took him by the arm and led him to the door. He got it all right. 'Now mind you be careful,' he said.

I shoved him out of the door and slammed it behind him. Then I went back to Blondie. She was doing her hair with my hair-brushes. Everyone seemed to be using my place like it was a hotel. I sat on the bed.

'A real funny guy,' I said.

'Oh, I like him darlin',' she said, glancing back over her shoulder. 'I think he's cute.'

She would. They were a pair.

'Well, baby,' I said, anxious to get her off my hands, 'I got your stuff so I guess you'll be moving out.'

She finished her hair and opened up the suit-case. I saw her make a little grimace at the way I had packed her things, but that didn't worry me. She'd got a hell of a crust asking me to do it, so if she didn't like it she could do what the monkey did.

She sorted some things out that she wanted to wear and began to get dressed. I sat there and watched her. The thing uppermost in my mind was that she was leaving town and I might never see her again. She was an important link between Katz and Spencer, and consequently she might be able to lead me to Mardi. I risked everything and had another try.

'There was a girl working for Spencer at the Mackenzie Fabrics. She was a mighty swell dame an' I got interested in her,' I began.

'Listen, hayseed,' she said, without looking up. She was bending over, fixing her suspender. 'I ain't interested in your love life.'

I was tempted to take a sock at her, but I kept my hands in my pockets. 'This dame has disappeared,' I went on. 'I can't find her—'

'If she was a good girl she's saved herself a lot of grief,' she said, straightening up and reaching for her dress.

'I could do things to you,' I said grimly.

'I know – I know. It's no use makin' a beef now.'

I went over to her and put my hands on her arms. I held her tight. She looked up at me, her face hardening. 'Don't start getting tough,' she said. 'I'll get that way too.'

'You haven't thought that Katz is hanging around waiting to put a slug in you, have you?' I said. 'You think you're bright enough to play a solo hand on this and get away with it. You might, but then again you might not. If one day I read that a nice-lookin' blonde has been fished out of the drink, I'll have a laugh. I am ready to take this thing over if you're ready to tell me what you know. If you wait too long, you might never be able to talk. So this is your last chance to get it off your chest.'

She sneered. 'What a mouthful,' she said. 'I can look after myself, big boy, don't let that grieve you. I've done it before, an' I'll keep on doin' it. I ain't tellin' you a thing. If you're so anxious, try and find out for yourself.'

I shrugged and let her go. 'Okay, wise guy,' I said. 'Go ahead and work on your own. Don't say I haven't warned you.'

She pulled on her dress and fixed her hat. As she closed her case, she said: 'The next time you see me, raise your lid. I shall be in the money.'

That crack told me something. Blondie had her eye on some easy dough. That meant blackmail. It explained why she wanted to work on her own. It explained quite a lot of things.

I said: 'You watch your step, Blondie. That game's dangerous.'

Her face was expressionless. She picked up her bag and moved to the door. 'I'll get by,' she said. 'If I don't see you again, keep sober.'

She opened the door and stepped into the passage. I watched her walk away, her tall figure swaying a little and her head held high.

I was just going back to my room when I saw the guy opposite standing in his doorway. His eyes were popping.

'Still seein' things?' I asked pleasantly, and went inside, shutting the door quietly against his palpitating curiosity.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BY the time Ackie and I got round to Hughson's place the party was well under way.

There were eight couples crammed into his small room and the air was thick with smoke. Everyone was drinking as hard as they could put it down and everyone was smoking.

There was a general shout when Ackie edged his way in. Most people got a laugh when they saw him. He got rid of his hat and coat and grabbed a bottle of Scotch.

Hughson came over to me and shook hands. 'This is a bum party, Nick,' he said apologetically. 'But I'm glad you've come.'

He led me round the room, introducing me. Most of the *Globe* guys were there and five stream-lined dames. They all looked so good I had to remark about it. Hughson explained they were from *The Moon and the Fiddle*, a musical that was running at the Plaza.

He got me settled down with a redhead and a glass of Scotch-and-soda in my hand, and then he went off to do the host with Ackie. Not that Ackie wasn't looking after himself.

The redhead was pretty tight and giggled a lot. She told me her name was Dawn Murray. When I asked her what her real name was she giggled a lot more but wouldn't tell me.

These parties always go the same way. Everyone gets plastered and talks about nothing and laughs when there's nothing to laugh about. I guess it's just an excuse to get tight.

Dawn started talking about books. This surprised me because I thought she wouldn't bother about reading. She'd just finished Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

'Now I bet that guy knows what he's writing about,' she said. 'I bet he lived in those camps. That's the most marvellous book I've ever read.'

A tall, lanky guy who I didn't know, and whose name I hadn't caught when I was introduced, pricked up his ears when he heard that and came over. He'd read it too, so I guessed they were soul-mates. I got up quietly and left them to it.

The certain sign that a party is going well is when the people start going into the kitchen. I thought I'd have a look and see if any one had got there yet. I drifted in and found a couple with their arms around each other and their faces glued together.

That told me the party was going all right.

'If she bites you, I'll give you the verdict,' I said.

The fellow prised himself loose. 'I bet your ma thinks you're a scream,' he said coldly.

Not so good. I went back to the sitting-room. Dawn and the lanky guy had exhausted Steinbeck and were sitting playing handies.

Someone started the gramophone and everyone broke up into couples to dance. There was no room for much movement, but so long as they'd got their arms round a girl and could shuffle their feet a yard or two, they didn't care.

I was content to sit in an armchair and watch them. Hughson came over after a little while and sat on the arm of my chair.

'The old man's pleased the way you handled the Colonel for us,' he said. 'He thinks you made a swell job of it.'

Hughson was the sort of guy who would never let anything rest. He kept on plugging at the thing, and how nice the Colonel was about it, until I thought I'd go haywire.

Then right in the middle of it the door opened and Mardi walked in.

I saw her at once, and I couldn't believe my eyes. Standing behind her was a tall guy with a lot of wavy hair and the sort of brown complexion that dames fall for and, of course, very bright blue eyes. This guy was handsome all right.

I stared at Mardi through the haze of tobacco smoke and thought I was seeing things. I said cautiously to Hughson: 'Who's the dame?'

He got off my chair arm. 'I don't know, but I'm goin' to find out . . . she's a peach, ain't she?'

He went over and shook hands with the tall guy. Then he had a few words with Mardi. I was suddenly aware that I was pretty high, and I was sorry about it. I was feeling a little sore about the tall guy. That didn't look so good.

Hughson had stopped them dancing and was taking the two round introducing them. I got out of my chair and put my tie straight. They got round to me at last. In the confusion of the crowd and the thickness of the atmosphere, Mardi hadn't seen me. Now she was standing right in front of me. We looked at each other and her face went white.

Hughson was saying: 'You must meet Nick . . . you'll like the guy. He's done more for the Women's Friendly Societies than most men. The trouble is he gets too friendly so they give him the gate in the end.'

I wasn't listening to what he said. Mardi was trying to tell me something without speaking. Her eyes were wide and she looked scared; then, seeing that I was still dumb, she said: 'Why haven't I met you before?'

I got it all right then. For some reason or other she didn't want to let on she knew me.

I said: 'You've got your chance now and I'm hoping you won't be disappointed.' It was a lame comeback, but I was up-creek without a paddle.

Hughson introduced me to the tall guy. He said: 'Nick, I want you to meet Lee Curtis,' then turning his head he went on: 'Curtis, this is—'

Mardi interrupted him. She broke in quite naturally: 'Oh, Barry, who's the funny little man over there?'

Hughson grinned. 'That's Mo Ackie. The smartest news-hawk on the street. Come on over and meet him.'

He led them away from me and Ackie started doing his stuff right away. I was learning fast. First, Mardi didn't want me to show that I'd met her and, second, she didn't want the big guy to know my name. I added that together. I was in a spot. I wanted to go over and get friendly with the girl, but obviously she didn't want Curtis to get any inkling, so I had to stay there and water at the mouth.

Dawn came over to me. 'Dance with me, hot man,' she said. 'Crush me up in your arms. My instincts are starving.'

I could have gladly wrung her neck, but thought I'd better mix in with the crowd. Mardi and Curtis were talking in a corner with Hughson. Curtis had his back to me, but Mardi kept her eyes on me as I shuffled around the room.

Dawn said: 'You might pay me a little attention. That brunette isn't going to fall for you.'

I jerked my eyes away from Mardi and grinned at her. 'You don't need to worry,' I said. 'Anyway, you could have the curly-haired guy, if she did.'

She shook her head. 'I don't want him,' she said.

I manoeuvred her to the far end of the room. 'What do you know about him?' I asked, jerking gently to the swing.

'Know about Lee Curtis?' Her eyebrows shot up. 'Plenty.'

I danced her round the room again and then the record finished. 'Suppose we go out into the kitchen and have a drink?'

'That's what I like about you. You anticipate my thoughts.'

We slipped out of the room and into the kitchen. It was in complete darkness, but I knew where Hughson had left his torch. She held the light while I fixed a Bacardi cocktail. Then we sat down on the table with the torch between us.

'I'm interested in this guy Curtis,' I said. 'Suppose you tell me about him.'

She sipped the Bacardi thoughtfully. 'There isn't anything to tell. He's got some dough, likes a good time, runs around with anything easy and changes his bedfellow once a week.'

I wondered what the hell Mardi was doing with him. You can tell if a girl's a tramp more times than not, and I was prepared to swear that Mardi was on the level.

'What's he do for a living?' I said.

'Oh, he's something big in the Mackenzie Fabrics. Secretary of the company or something. Do you mind not talking about him any more . . . I'm getting bored.'

'Sure, that's all right,' I said.

My brain was busy. So this guy was tied up in the same business. That told me why Mardi wanted to keep my name out of it. I told myself that Mardi knew something and I was going to find out what just as soon as I got her to myself.

Because she expected it, I did a little necking with Dawn and then left her sitting on the table in the gloom, patiently waiting for me to come back. I'd made up my mind that I wasn't going to be alone any more with that dame that night.

I looked into the sitting-room. The party was still going on. Mardi was dancing with Hughson. Just as I was going to walk in I heard the telephone in the hall ringing. Hughson looked at me and he called: 'See who it is, will you, Nick?'

I said, 'Sure,' and went over to the telephone. 'Hullo? This is Barry Hughson's apartment.'

A woman said: 'Is Mr. Curtis there? Mr. Lee Curtis?'

I said, 'Hold on,' and put the telephone down. I went into the sitting-room. Curtis was doing his stuff with Ackie's Spanish dame. I went over. 'You're wanted on the 'phone,' I said.

He looked startled. 'You sure?' he asked, getting to his feet.

'If your name's Curtis, I am,' I said.

He gave me a quick, hard look and then went outside. I saw him shut the door carefully behind him, and I looked around for Mardi. Before I could spot her, the Spanish dame started doing her stuff. At times, women are hell.

By the time I'd got away from her Curtis had come back into the room. He was looking mad all right. He went over to Hughson. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I've had an urgent telephone message. I've got to get home.'

Hughson didn't worry a lot. He made sympathetic noises. 'You're not taking Mardi with you?' he said anxiously. 'She an' I are gettin' on well together.'

I moved a little closer so that I could hear.

Curtis looked down at Mardi. 'I'll take you home first,' he said, 'or do you want to stay? I'm damn' sorry about this. . . .'

She shook her head. 'I'll stay. You go on. Maybe you can come back.'

He hesitated. I could see he didn't want to go and he was sore as hell.

Hughson put in: 'I'll see her back. You don't have to worry.'

'All right. I'll see you tomorrow,' Curtis said to Mardi.

He went out of the door quickly, not bothering to say good-bye to any of the others. That's the sort of guy Curtis was. No one was of any interest to him unless he was sure that he was going to get something out of them.

Mardi said to Hughson: 'I'd love a gin-and-lime.'

'Sure, I'll fix you one. Just wait a moment. I won't be long,' kidding himself that she was going into mourning until he came back.

I stepped up to her as soon as he went into the kitchen. I was hoping that Dawn would hold him for a little while. 'I want to talk to you,' I said quietly. 'May I take you home?'

She nodded.

I got a swell feeling just standing looking at her. 'Mind if we go soon?'

She shook her head. 'When you like,' she said.

Hughson came back with the gin-and-lime. When he saw me his face darkened. 'On your way, big boy,' he said. 'There's a virgin in the kitchen waiting for you.'

I shook my head. 'You're too late. Mardi an' me are old friends. She's just having the drink and we're going home . . . together and alone.'

Hughson turned to Mardi. 'I've warned you about this guy,' he said heatedly. 'He spends all his time grabbing things that don't belong to him and wrecking homes.'

Mardi laughed. 'I feel like being wrecked right now,' she said. 'It's getting late, Barry, and I ought to go.'

Hughson groaned. 'Give me one more dance and I'll let you,' he said. 'You had much better let me see you home.'

I nodded to her behind his back. I didn't want this to look too sudden. They danced off together and I went over to Ackie. I told him I was moving off.

He was so plastered that he didn't care if I was going to commit suicide. 'Don't be hard on her,' he said, screwing up his eyes. 'She looks a swell girl.'

I signalled to Mardi that I'd meet her downstairs. I didn't want Dawn to arrive just as we were going. I need not have worried my head about her. She had passed out under the kitchen table.

Five minutes later Mardi came running down the stairs.

She wore a perky little hat and a nice fur coat. She looked good.

We didn't have to wait long before a taxi crawled by. I waved and he pulled up at the kerb. 'Where shall I tell him?' I asked.

She hesitated. Then she said: 'I – I haven't got a home any more . . . do you think I could put up at a hotel or somewhere?'

I gaped at her. 'Have you got any luggage?'

She nodded. 'It's at the station,' she said. 'I could go there first and collect it, but I want to catch an early train.'

I said: 'If I suggest you come back to my place, I want you to know that I don't mean anything wrong. I just offer you my roof and hope you will accept it.'

She stood looking into my face for several seconds, then she said: 'Thank you. It's nice of you.'

Hardly believing that I had heard correctly, I handed her into the taxi.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

On the short trip from Hughson's apartment to my place we didn't say a word. It was incredible to me that she was sitting by my side, willing to share my rooms with me, and I'd only known her for such a short time.

When a girl shows such willingness, I'm usually sure that I'm on to a good thing. With Mardi it was different. There was something about her that built up a surrounding wall that protected her from any mean thoughts that might come her way. I'm not going to say that every guy wouldn't try to make a pass, but as far as I was concerned she got me like that.

She sat quietly in the corner of the taxi and looked out of the window. Every now and then, when we passed a street light, I could see her clearly. With that perky little hat on her head and the fur collar tight at her throat, she looked swell.

We got to my apartment and I paid off the taxi.

Quietly we crept up the stairs. I was nervous of the guy opposite me, but as it was getting on for two o'clock I guessed he'd be asleep.

We got into my apartment without disturbing any one. I shut the door, turned on the light and tossed my hat on the settee.

'Whew!' I said. 'I was sure gettin' the jitters comin' up the stairs.'

She stood looking round the room. 'But it's nice,' she said. 'What a lot of books you have . . . and isn't that cute?'

She went over to examine my miniature bar in the corner. We both kept our voices low like two conspirators. I wandered over and got behind the counter. 'What would you like?' I said. 'Suppose we have some rye and ginger . . . it's grand stuff to sleep on.'

She again looked at me. I could see she was just a little doubtful of me: not scared, but not quite sure.

I grinned at her. 'Baby,' I said, 'you don't have to worry about me. I know what you're thinkin' but you can forget it.

With another dame, yes, but with you, no. I guess you would never have come here if you didn't want some help bad . . . well, I want to help, an' there won't be a cheque comin' in.'

When I said that, she relaxed. She said: 'Make it a very small rye and a lot of ginger.'

While I was fixing the drinks, she went over and sat in the big armchair. It was one of those chairs that give to the floor. From where I was standing I could see the top of her hat and a lot of her legs. She opened the fur coat and draped it over the side of the chair.

It was chilly, so I switched on the little electric stove I used between the periods when the steam heat was off and the evenings got cold.

I came over with the drinks and gave her one of the glasses. Then leaning against the mantelshelf, I nodded to her over the rim. 'Safe landin',' I said, and we drank.

She lay back in the armchair, holding the glass in one hand, and for a minute shut her eyes. I didn't hurry her. I guessed she wanted to get her facts together, and I was happy enough to stand and watch her.

'I *do* want your help,' she said at last, looking up at me.

'All right. You're goin' to have it. If you're in a jam, you don't have to get scared. We'll work it out together.'

'Why, Mr. Mason, are you doing this for me?'

With an opening like that I wasn't going to act the village hick. 'Because I'm crazy about you,' I said. 'You're the first girl I've met that I can look at and talk to without wondering if I could take you for a ride. You're the first girl I've met who's got everything and yet . . . and yet . . . oh, hell! I can't explain it . . . but, you've got me jumping through hoops. . . .'

This outburst startled her all right. She tried to struggle out of the chair.

'Now wait a minute,' I said hastily. 'You asked me an' I've told you. That doesn't mean that you an' I aren't still on the level with each other. I don't want you to think I'm just putting on an act. I'm not. I'm being straight with you, so for the love of Mike don't start thinkin' up wrong angles to this.'

She sank back into the chair. 'Really, Mr. Mason—' she began.

'Listen, could you make it "Nick"? I won't insist if you don't feel you can, but it would tickle me to death.'

She laughed at me. 'You're crazy,' she said. 'But you're nice. Thank you for saying what you have said. I want someone who will tell me what to do. I think I'm very lucky to find you.'

Can you tie that? She thought she was lucky to find me! Now I ask you!

When I got over it, I said: 'Okay, now suppose you tell me what it's all about?'

She handed the glass back to me. 'I don't want any more.' Then she got out of the chair and took off her hat and coat. She was wearing a dark-green evening thing that fitted her like a snake-skin and spread out into a full skirt. I reckoned that cost plenty of money.

'May I have a cigarette?'

She could have had the moon. I lit it for her and she sat on the arm of the chair. 'This is the craziest thing that's ever happened to me,' she said at last. 'Perhaps I'd better start at the beginning. You remember the day when you took me out to lunch?'

I nodded. Remember the day? Why, I'd got it tattooed on my brain.

'When I got back Mr. Spencer sent for me and was furious that I had gone out with you. I couldn't just understand what he was talking about. I guess I got mad too and told him I'd go out with whom I liked in my lunch-hours. So he fired me.'

She paused and looked to see what I thought of that. I didn't think it was the right time to tell her that I knew this already. Maybe she might've got a little sore if she knew I'd been around making inquiries. So I made a few tutting noises and waggled my eyebrows up and down.

'I was so mad I just walked straight out of the office and went home. The next morning I got a letter asking me to come in and see Mr. Spencer. I threw the letter away and took no notice. I spent the morning looking for another job. It surprised me the number of offers I got.'

'Just a moment,' I put in. 'You say you got a lot of offers. Why did that surprise you?'

She shrugged a little. 'You know how it is today. Jobs don't grow on trees. But I really got some fantastic offers. It made me think there was something wrong about them, so I didn't close with any of them. I went home to think about them.'

'Did you tell them that you'd been working with Mackenzie Fabrics?'

'Of course.'

'And were you trying for a job in the same trade?'

She looked at me hard. 'Yes,' she said at last.

I grinned at her. 'Then that ain't a mystery to me. Your Mackenzie Fabrics pay the biggest dividend in the trade. They have more dough than all the rest put together. Why, naturally those guys wanted you to work for them. They were hoping they'd learn how the business was run.'

She looked a little blank, then she laughed. 'I didn't think of it like that,' she confessed ruefully.

'I bet you thought the boss was goin' to come the heavy?'

'I'm afraid I did.' She coloured a little. I had to make a strong effort not to pat her.

'All right,' I said, 'forget it. You know now that you can get a swell job if you want to, so let's have the rest of it.'

She shook her head. 'I can't, that's the trouble. When I got back to my apartment I found Lee Curtis waiting for me. He's Spencer's right-hand man. We don't like him a lot in the office, and I was none too pleased to find him there. He told me that Spencer wanted me to come back. He was sorry that he'd shouted me out and would forget it. Well, I was still sore, and I knew I could get something just as good, so I said no. Curtis started pressing me and finally persuaded me to come back and see Spencer.

'The way Spencer went on made me suspicious. I didn't know what it was all about, but I didn't like the way he almost begged me to come back. I turned him down.' She shivered suddenly. 'I can see him now. He sat behind his big desk, his face went white and he looked as if he could strangle me. "You'll be sorry about this," he said in a horrible, quiet voice. "If I were you, I'd get out of town."

'He really terrified me and I didn't get to sleep that night. Then from that moment to this morning I've been watched. A tall, thin man, dressed in black with a black slouched hat pulled over his face, always turns up wherever I go. Two days of that decided me. I packed my things, gave notice to my landlady and prepared to leave town.'

'Where were you going?' I put in.

'I thought I'd go down to the coast. I wanted a vacation and I had got some money put by, so I thought I'd go down there until they had forgotten about me.'

I didn't want to scare her, but I thought they were not likely to forget her. I just said: 'So what happened?'

She twisted her hands in her lap, and a little frown settled in her eyes. 'I thought I was being awfully smart,' she said. 'I arranged with my landlady to get my stuff to the station, and I went off on a long ramble round town, taking the thin man along behind me. I thought I could give him the slip, get to the station and leave town without anyone knowing.' She smiled at me ruefully. It certainly did me a lot of good when that honey smiled at me.

'I was all set when I ran into Curtis. He wouldn't take "no" for an answer. He stuck to me like glue for the rest of the afternoon and then insisted on bringing me to Barry Hughson's party. That's all.'

I shut my eyes and let my brain sort it out.

'Why do you think he brought me to Hughson's and then walked out on me?'

'Curtis think a lot of you?' I asked.

She looked uncomfortable. 'He has been rather pressing,' she admitted. 'But then, he's like that with most girls.'

I could think of a number of reasons why Curtis had taken her to Hughson's, but I wasn't going to tell her. Suppose Spencer had planned to get rid of her and Curtis knew about it? If this guy was a little soft on her, and I'm not blaming him if he was, he'd probably hang around with her to see that nothing happened. Once she was round at Hughson's place, he might think she was safe for a while. Then this other dame rings him up and he has to get out and leave her.

It struck me Mardi wasn't any too safe running around at large. The point was to find out how much she knew.

I said quietly, 'Suppose I tell you all about this business, then maybe you can see where you fit in.'

'Do I fit in anywhere?'

I grinned. 'Yeah, I'm afraid you do.' I lit another cigarette and got down to it. 'I wantta put this to you just like you knew nothing about it. Maybe if I put it to you like that, you might get a slant on it. To start at the beginning. Larry Richmond was shot to death almost a year ago. This guy was a rich playboy who called himself the President of the Mackenzie Fabrics. He was no more President than I am, but that don't matter for the moment. His chief job seemed to be peddling the stock of the company to his rich friends. Well, he succeeded, not because he was a good salesman, but because the shares were worth having. They kept climbing and everyone was happy. The Mackenzie Fabrics was a blind for some illegal racket, with a list of shareholders including the Police Commissioner and the Customs officials. Richmond was playin' a cagey hand. As everyone was gettin' a share under a strictly legal guise, no one was going to kick. Okay, that's the first set-up. The fact that Richmond never showed up at the office and just fooled around spending the dough points to Spencer being the guy who runs the racket.' I got up to give myself a drink.

Mardi sat quite still. Her face was a little pale and she looked tired. It was getting on towards three o'clock, but I'd got to get this thing sorted out.

'Then Richmond gets bumped. Very fortunate this, because Spencer did the bumping. I guess he was getting tired of doing all the work and seeing Richmond doin' all the spending. If Spencer took the rap the lid would come off Mackenzie Fabrics all right. That wouldn't please the shareholders. I don't know, but I can guess what happened. They all got around and wagged their heads about this and came to the only conclusion. Someone had to be the fall-guy.

'Now Richmond played around with the dames. As long as the dame was a looker, she was okay by him. He was fooling around with a floozie of the streets just before he was knocked off, and this bird usually ran around with a guy named Vessi, a real twelve-minute egg. What could be simpler? Vessi is the fall-guy. They frame that bohunk so fast he's dizzy in the head. The cops frame him, Spencer frames him, the lawyers frame him, and the judge frames him. So he's framed. Just like that. To make matters safe an' sound, they get his moll to frame him.

'This is where I come in. The case to me was just a sordid bit of shooting with no news angle for my particular stuff. One night a dame rings up and tells me she's sending round a ticket that'll let me in to see Vessi's execution. She tells me that Vessi will give me an angle on this business, and she will pay me ten grand to explode the frame. This dame is plenty steamed up. Before I can turn it down she rings off.

'Okay, I'm the mug. I go along and see Vessi have a noseful.

Before he hands in his pail, he tells me that Spencer pulled the shootin'. I pass the news on to the mystery woman, who sends me five grand as an act of good faith. Before I can lay my hands on the dough, Blondie, that's Vessi's late moll, nips into my room and grabs it. I do a bit of Philo Vance stuff and track this moll to her lair. We have a few words and then in blows Katz. Now Katz is Spencer's bodyguard. A guy that walks around loaded up with shooting-irons and itching to use 'em. All he seems keen about is to find out who's been staking me to start trouble. This guy gets plenty tough so I tell him a story that's not quite true but which he falls for.

'I then do some thinking and decide that I'm not interested. I'm a peace-lovin' guy an' this seems too excitin'. Anyway, why the hell should I worry about Vessi? He was just a small-time crook. So when the dame comes on the 'phone again I tell her I'm through.

'This dame interests me. I want to know who she is. I had a bad break the other day. I nearly ran into her but just missed it. I won't go into that now, but maybe I'll tell you about it later. The next excitement is you. I wanted to see a little more of you, and when I heard you were missing I got worried. I got still more worried when this dame rings up and hints that I'll find you in trouble at an old east-side wharf.

'I go along there and have an argument with three guys, and instead of finding you I run into Blondie again. She also is on her way out of town. Then I run into you, and I guess that's where I stop.' I sat back with a sigh of relief.

Mardi said: 'I believe I can help you. There are a lot of things I couldn't understand which now I think I could fit into the puzzle.'

'Suppose we look at it from this angle—' I began.

She smiled at me. 'Could it wait until tomorrow?' she asked. 'I'm so tired. Look at the time. I feel as if I shall go to sleep right here in this chair.'

I got up quickly. 'Sure,' I said. 'I guess I'm over-anxious. You get some sleep. We can talk over what you're goin' to do and all about this business tomorrow.'

She got out of the chair slowly and stretched. Standing there in front of the electric stove, the strong reflection of the elements outlining her legs through her dress, her grand little head back, and her arms raised a little, she looked good. I wanted to put my arms round her. It was tough going not to start anything.

I said: 'Through there is the bedroom. You go ahead. You get some sleep.'

She said sleepily: 'Can I borrow things from you?'

I went ahead of her and fished out a pair of my pyjamas and my dressing-gown. I tossed them on the bed.

She came in and stood watching me. 'It's nice of you,' she said, 'giving up your bed. Do you mind an awful lot?'

I didn't move. I just didn't trust myself. 'No, I don't mind,' I said.

The sudden unevenness in my voice made her look at me quickly. 'I'm sorry I can't do what some girls would do,' she said steadily. 'Not because I think it's wrong, but because I think it's too soon.'

I went over to her and stood very close, 'You're swell,' I said, 'I don't want that. I just want you to know I'm crazy about you. I want to help you and do things for you.'

She put her hand on my arm. 'Thank you.'

I gave a grin and walked out, shutting the door behind me.

The fat guy and Gus were sitting under the lamp waiting for me. The fat guy held an automatic directed at my belly. He said: 'Reach up, lug, grab a handful of heaven.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THOSE two guys got me rattled for the moment. I leant against the door and put my hands up. There was a vicious look in the fat guy's eyes that I didn't like. I guessed he was feeling mighty sore with me.

Did he know Mardi was right behind me? Was he after her or was he just going to settle things up with me?

I said softly: 'How's your noggin, Gus? You birds want a lot of shakin', don't you?'

The fat guy waved the gun at me. 'Come away from the door, lug, we want the dame. Come on . . . I ain't goin' to ask twice.'

I yelled: 'Mardi, lock the door quick . . . trouble's arrived.'

Gus sprang towards me with a curse. He came at me from the side so that his body didn't get in the line of the fat guy's gun. I wedged myself against the door and let him come.

The fat guy said: 'Get him away . . . if he starts anything, I'll drill him.'

Gus gripped my arm and tried to swing me from the door.

I was too heavy for him and just for a second he came off balance. I jerked my arm a little, and he fell forward, right in the line of fire. I clutched him to me like he was my long-lost brother and lammed a couple of short ones to his belly. My heel thudded against the door and I yelled again: 'Lock up, quick.'

The two punches I had shot into Gus held him for a second and then he caught me with a swinger on the jaw. It was a nice punch, and it sent me over. I took him with me and we went down in a heap on the floor.

The fat guy came forward and rammed the barrel of his rod into my neck. 'Take it easy,' he said softly, 'this gun don't make much noise.'

The cold barrel digging into me cooled me off quick. I let go of Gus, who scrambled to his feet. The fat guy said: 'I don't want to rub you out, but I'll do it all right if you ask for it.'

I met his eyes. This guy meant everything he said.

'I'll be good,' I said.

The barrel of the gun looked like a cannon to me.

Gus said: 'Watch him . . . he's slippery.'

The fat guy shook his head. 'He'll be all right now, you see.'

I sat on the floor hoping that Mardi would start yelling out of the window. I didn't hear a sound, and my heart sank.

'Come on, get up,' the fat guy said, digging the gun into me again.

I got to my feet.

'If you think you're goin' to start anything, I should forget it. This rod's got a light trigger.'

I guess that guy would think nothing of touching his gun off, so I just stood.

Gus came round the back of me and jerked my arms behind me. For a moment I stiffened my muscles, but the gun kept digging into me. I thought maybe I'd be more useful to Mardi alive than dead, so I let him rope me.

I tried the dodge of expanding my arm muscles, so that I could have a little slack when the time came, but Gus knew all about roping, and when he put the pressure on I called him some fancy names.

They stood back and looked at me.

Gus said to the fat guy: 'We gotta get goin'.' He went over to Mardi's door and turned the handle. The door was locked. I knew that door would want some opening. They could only do that by making a hell of a noise.

I said: 'Skip it, you two guys, can't you leave us alone? You ain't getting in here without callin' out the riot squad, so why not turn it in?'

The fat guy gave a little chuckle. When he laughed he certainly looked mean. 'This is easy,' he said. 'We'll get her out quick an' quiet.'

He went to the door and pushed Gus on one side. He put his bullet-head against the panels. 'Come on out, sister,' he said, speaking in his hoarse, croaking voice. 'We want you out in ten seconds or we start on your boy friend.'

I yelled: 'To hell with them, Mardi! You stay where you are. Yell out of the window . . .!'

Gus hit me across the mouth with the back of his hand. His bony knuckle cut my lip and I staggered across the room, getting my balance.

The fat guy knocked on the door again. 'Wait a minute, sister,' he called. 'Don't you start anythin' until I'm through. Then you can make up your mind. I know you're in there, so you don't have to be cagey. You can hear me okay?'

'I can hear you.' Mardi's voice was pretty steady.

'If you don't come out right now, I'm going to get tough with your boy friend. When I say tough, I mean tough, get it? I'll give you ten seconds, an' if you ain't out by then I'm goin' to give him the works.'

I dodged Gus's rush and yelled, 'It's a bluff . . . yell out of the window . . . don't open—'

Again Gus's fist smashed into my face and this time I went over. I was quick enough to jerk my head away from the kick he aimed at me.

Mardi opened the door and came out.

The fat guy and Gus stood motionless staring at her. I saw Gus's eyes open and he pursed his mouth.

She stood framed in the doorway, one hand hanging by her side and the other holding the door handle. Her face was pale and her eyes were wide, but she held her head up and she wasn't looking scared.

'What do you want?' she said, her voice steady and cold.

I felt mighty proud of the way she faced up to these two thugs. The fat guy came forward, his face beaming, but his eyes very mean.

'Well! Well! Ain't she a peach?' he said, standing in front of her. 'We're all goin' for a little ride. Get your wrap, will you? An' make it fast.'

I struggled to my feet. 'Listen,' I said, keeping an eye on Gus, who was beginning to sidle towards me, 'you won't get anywhere on a gag like this. Drop it, will you?'

The fat guy glanced at Gus. 'If that punk opens his trap any more, shut it for him and shut it for good.'

Gus drew a rubber truncheon from his back pocket. He balanced it thoughtfully in his hand. 'Sure,' he said, and grinned.

Mardi came over to me, but the fat guy stepped between us. 'We don't want to get tough,' he said, 'but we will if you don't behave.'

She looked at me and I gave her a pale grin. I was feeling bad about all this. Then she squared her shoulders and picked up her wrap.

The fat guy stepped to her side. 'That's fine,' he said. 'Now we go downstairs. If you start anythin', Gus'll wash up the punk. Hear that, Gus?'

Gus said, 'Sure.' He threw my overcoat cape-wise over my shoulders and jerked his head. We all went out into the corridor and went silently down into the street. There was a big closed car standing outside the house. The streets were deserted and the pale dawn was coming up over the roofs. It would be over an hour before any one would be around on the streets.

Gus shoved me in the back of the car and the fat guy got in next. Mardi followed. We three sat in a row. Gus went to the front and climbed under the wheel. He switched on the ignition and engaged the gears. The car shot away from the kerb at a high speed.

The fat guy said to Mardi: 'You ain't got to get scared. I'd be sortta soft with a honey like you if you were nice.'

'Listen, greaseball,' I put in. 'Suppose you skip your stuff. It gives me a pain.'

His face suddenly set. 'I'm getting mighty tired of you,' he said. 'You're goin' to run into plenty of grief before long.'

I wondered what chance I had if I jumped him. I thought I could sock him in his puss with my two hands and while he was getting his breath I might do some more damage.

He was no fool. I guess he saw I was getting ready to start something, so he dug his gun into me. 'Pipe down,' he said curtly.

The big car flashed through the empty streets with hardly a roll. In the faint light from the dashboard I could make out the outline of Gus's head. He kept his eyes on the road and drove hard.

'Where the hell do you think you're takin' us?' I asked for something to say.

The fat guy said, 'Did you hear that, Gus? He wants to know where we're goin'.'

Gus shrugged, but didn't say anything.

I wanted to keep the fat guy's mind off Mardi, so I kept talking. 'What's your name?' I asked. 'I get kind of embarrassed callin' you "greaseball".'

He turned a little. I could see he was getting mad. 'You won't get anywhere with that stuff,' he said evenly. 'Suppose you keep your trap shut; I'm gettin' tired of hearing your yappin'.'

Mardi hadn't said a word the whole time. I couldn't see much of her, and when I leant forward the fat guy gave me a hard one in the chest with his elbow.

I thought when the time came for a show-down, I was certainly going to give this punk the works.

I suddenly recognized the sound of a ship's siren. So we were going back to Wensdy Wharf again. Sure enough, in a few minutes, the car turned into the wharf and pulled up outside the same house.

Gus got out first and opened the door. 'Come on out,' he said to Mardi.

She stepped out and he pushed her into the house. The fat guy followed, jerking me with him. We all silently trooped upstairs into the room where Blondie had been kept prisoner.

'Home again,' I said, leaning against the wall. I had been testing the ropes round my wrists and arms during the drive, but I could get nowhere with them. They were on for good.

Gus shoved me into a chair.

The fat guy went outside, and I heard him go into another room. I heard him say something, then a deep voice answered him. I saw Mardi start a little and she looked rather wildly at me. She said something with her lips, but I couldn't get it.

Then the door opened again and a tall, heavily built man came in, followed closely by the fat guy.

He stood and looked at Mardi, then he said, 'I'm sorry about this, but you're rather in the way.' The way he said it made me suddenly feel cold. He was so casual and calm, but there was a definite threat in his words.

He certainly scared Mardi. She took a step back. 'But, Mr. Spencer . . .' she began and stopped.

So this was Lu Spencer. I looked at him closely. There was nothing very grand about this guy. He was running a little to fat and he was getting thick in the middle. His coal-black moustache and his white hair made odd contrasts. He looked like he had dyed his moustache. His eyes dropped a little, as if he were very tired, but the light in them belied any sign of fatigue.

He selected a cigar from a pigskin case and put it between his teeth. 'Give the lady a chair,' he said to Gus.

When Mardi had sat down, her hands twisting a little in her lap, he glanced over at me.

'So you're Mason,' he said, moving over to get a good look at me.

'Yeah,' I said. 'If this is your idea of a good gag, I don't think much of it. Suppose you cut this movie stuff out right now.'

He went over and sat on the edge of the table. 'It's time we had a little chat,' he said, tipping the ash off his cigar with his finger. 'I'm cautious, Mason, always have been. When I think trouble's coming my way, I act quick. I don't wait for trouble to get going, I meet it before it starts and I stop it starting.'

I shrugged. 'Where do I find that little fable?'

'You've been warned off before, but it seems like you won't learn. I've decided to stop you putting your oar in.'

Boy! Would I like to have my hands free so that I could have socked that guy one? 'Ain't you barkin' up the wrong alley?'

'I'm going to be frank with you,' he went on. 'It would be very inconvenient to have a further investigation in the Richmond murder. I've got the business to think of and, as I say, it would be inconvenient. You've been offered big money to start trouble, haven't you?'

I looked at him thoughtfully. Then I said: 'Maybe your pal Katz has told you my angle.'

Spencer nodded. 'Yes,' he said, 'I know about that.'

'All right,' I said. 'Now I had decided to leave the business alone. What's one cheap crook among so many? I didn't have to grieve about Vessi. I was bein' offered ten grand. That ain't such a lot of dough. So I decided to leave it alone. Then, when you started trouble for Miss Jackson, I had to come into it again.'

Spencer glanced at Mardi and then back at me. His eyebrows went up a little, and he pursed his mouth. 'So that's how it sits, huh?'

'If you mean that I ain't sitting still when you start pushing a nice girl around, you're right,' I said.

'No more than that?'

I wanted to belt that guy in the puss very badly indeed. I didn't say anything.

He chewed his cigar thoughtfully. 'You've got me in a spot, Mason,' he said at last. 'You and this young woman here could be a nuisance. Between you both you might start trouble which might upset my plans. If we can't come to terms, I'm afraid you two are in for a bad time.'

His voice was very casual, but I didn't like his tone. I glanced across at Mardi and she wasn't looking too grand.

'Suppose you put your cards on the table,' I invited.

He looked over at Gus. 'Clear out, you two,' he said. 'I'll call you if I want you.'

When they had gone he began to pace up and down the room. I could see he had a lot on his mind.

'Look,' he said at last, 'I've got to find out who's at the bottom of all this. Who's willing to pay you ten grand to make things awkward for me.'

I bet he'd like to know that, but he wasn't getting any help from me. I had already made up my mind that I was going to look into that also.

I shrugged. 'You can search me,' I said. 'I've been asking myself the same question.'

He came over and stood close to me. 'I've got a hunch that you know something that would give me the key to this. I'm going to ask you to come clean.'

As I began to speak he held up his hand. 'Don't be in a hurry,' he said; 'Think first. If you can't remember, I'm going to jog your memory.'

I said, 'I've told you I got a note which was typewritten. I've no more idea than the dead who it could be.'

He said, 'Would it be a man or a woman?'

I shook my head. 'I tell you I can't help you.'

He stood looking at me, his face slightly flushed. 'That's a pity,' he said. He walked over to the door and jerked it open. 'Gus, come in here.'

The thin dope shuffled in and stood waiting. His little eyes restlessly wandered from my face up to the ceiling and back again.

Spencer said, 'I think this guy knows something. At the moment he won't talk. Suppose you start on our friend here . . . maybe he'll get inspiration that way.'

Mardi started to her feet. Her face had gone very white. Gus stepped over to her, and as she turned to run he grabbed her and twisted her round. One of his hands held her wrists.

Spencer looked over at me. 'Well,' he said, 'you can make your mind up. Gus has done this sort of thing before.'

I said with difficulty, 'Tell that swine to take his hands off her.'

Spencer said coldly, 'You're wasting time.' He jerked his head at Gus. 'Go ahead,' he said.

Gus grinned at me and moved towards Mardi. She suddenly came to life and kicked him on his shin. Her shoes weren't hard enough to stop a guy like Gus.

I said quickly, 'Okay, don't touch her.'

Spencer said, 'Hold it, Gus.' Then he turned to me. 'Was it a man or a woman?'

'It was a woman.'

'How do you know?'

'She came through on the telephone.'

Spencer said to Gus, 'All right, wait outside.'

Gus went out slowly.

Mardi leant against the wall. I could see her mouth was quivering, but she still kept her chin up.

Spencer looked at me keenly. 'What sort of voice did she have?'

I shrugged. 'I guess she disguised it. It was hard and metallic, but it wasn't a natural sort of voice.'

He wandered about the room a bit, then he came and stood over me. 'So it was a woman, eh? I've got to look for a woman.'

I didn't say anything.

He looked at Mardi and then at me. 'As for you two . . .' he passed his hand over his hair, 'you don't know what you're bucking. Take my advice and keep clear of this business. If that woman comes over the 'phone again, let me know. I'll give you a lot more than ten grand if you can turn her up.'

I said, 'I'm through with this business, anyway,' and meant it.

'I'm going to turn you loose, but take my tip . . . get out of town.' He walked over to Mardi. 'I'm sorry you got smart, baby,' he said. 'You did some good work for me.'

Mardi turned her face away and he shrugged. Then he walked to the door and went out.

Mardi came over to me unsteadily.

'Get me free, honey,' I said urgently. 'I don't like the sound of this.'

She got the knot undone after a struggle and I stood up, rubbing my wrists.

The fat guy came in, holding his gun. He jerked his head. 'You can beat it,' he said curtly. 'Come on, get out of here.'

We went down the dark stairs, and he followed us closely. Gus was standing holding the front door open. I had my muscles tense, ready to start something if those two wanted trouble, but they just saw us to the door.

We stepped into the dark, cold street and the door slammed behind us.

I turned and looked at Mardi. 'Well, for Pete's sake,' I said. 'What do you make of that?'

Mardi put her hands to her face and I heard a little choking sob jerk in her throat. I put my arms round her and pulled her to me. She came to me with her head on my chest.

'It's all right, honey,' I said. 'We're out of it now. Don't worry . . . it's all right now.'

In the distance a siren hooted, and the wash from a passing ship suddenly slapped against the side of the wharf.

I said, 'Let's get out of this. We've had enough grief for one night.'

It was several minutes before she drew from me, and I was mighty sorry to feel her go. We went down the street together, out of the dark into the lights of the main street.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was noon before I woke. For several minutes I couldn't make out where the hell I was, then I remembered and sat up on my couch with a rueful grin.

The sun was shining all right, and Mardi was in my bed in the next room. I didn't have anything to beef about. I swung my legs to the floor and went into the bathroom. A cold shower did a lot to bring me to the surface, and after a shave I felt good.

I put on my silk dressing-gown and ran a comb through my hair, then I put my head round Mardi's door and took a look at her. I could just see a small lump in the bed and I guessed she was still sleeping. I got a big kick out of thinking she was right there in my bed.

I telephoned downstairs for a double breakfast, and while I was waiting I smoked a cigarette.

The service waiter looked at me curiously when he wheeled the tray in, and he took a quick gander round the room. I gave him a dollar and he grinned at me. Maybe he'd been young once, and maybe he remembered using a double breakfast in a single room. Anyway, the dollar did the trick and he took himself off without any crack.

I knocked on the bedroom door. After the second try I heard her call out. I put my head round the door. 'H'yah, pal,' I said. 'Feel like puttin' on the feed bag?'

She struggled up in bed and blinked at me. Some dames look like the wrath of God in the early morning. Mardi looked swell. Her hair was all curls and her eyes looked large and lazy. She stretched a little. The long sleeves of my pyjamas hid her hands.

'Give me two minutes,' she said, 'and I'll be right with you.'

She jumped out of bed and slipped on the woollen dressing-gown and flopped off to the bathroom. I wheeled the tray in and parked it beside the bed. Then I pulled up one of the blinds and left the other. Strong sunshine after a night out is apt to come tough.

She came back after five minutes and smiled at me. 'Did you sleep well?' she asked, climbing into bed.

'Very well,' I said, feeling sappy. I guess no one had asked me that one since I'd been out in the world earning my first dollar. 'How did you make out?'

She arranged the pillows and sat up; the dressing-gown spread over the sheet. 'Oh, I feel grand right now,' she said. 'I thought I'd've died last night, I was so tired.'

I brought the tray over to the bed. 'I'm glad we were together on that,' I said, looking at her. 'I'd've hated you to run into those guys on your own.'

She took the cup of coffee, but she didn't take her eyes off my face. 'I'm glad, too.'

'Do you want to talk about last night?' she said. I shrugged. 'What's there to talk about?'

'Will it be all right?'

Again I shrugged. 'I don't know,' I said, 'I've been puzzling my brains. I can't see how we can worry Spencer. After all, we have no proof and we don't seem to be getting anywhere. Somehow, I reckon it would be as well to leave the thing alone. How do you feel about it?'

She frowned a little. 'I'm afraid we won't get away with it as easily as all that. You see, there's a lot you don't know about it all, and I'm scared sick that you're going to get yourself involved more than you think.'

I lit a cigarette. 'Tell me,' I said, getting up to take the tray and to give her a cigarette also.

She relaxed back on the pillows. 'It all begins some time ago,' she said. 'I think I know who your mysterious lady is.'

I sat up. 'You do?' I said.

She nodded. 'Yes, I think it's Sarah Spencer, Lu's wife.'

'Well, for Pete's sake.'

'It fits, once you know the inside story. You see, I was Mr. Spencer's private secretary, and I used to spend a good bit of my time at his house. He worked late and he liked to have me around to straighten things out for him. Sarah Spencer was around a lot and I was always running into her. Spencer is crazy about her, but she two-times him from morning till night.

How it is he hasn't got wise to her beats me. You see, I do know that Vessi was one of her boy friends.'

I got to my feet and began to wander around the room. 'I'd like you to expand on that,' I said.

'She was very fond of Vessi,' Mardi told me. 'Really fond of him. Sarah is the type who likes them rough, and Vessi meant a lot to her. When he was executed she nearly went out of her mind. I had to work for two days right in the house, so I should know. She drove us all haywire. You have no idea. I think she hates Lu.'

I sat on the bed. 'You've opened the door,' I said. 'As you say, it fits. She wants to get Lu on trial. That evens things up with Vessi and it gets rid of him. She couldn't come out in the open and accuse Lu of knocking Richmond off. The Vessi angle would come out in court and it wouldn't be nice for her. So she hides behind a telephone and makes me the goat.'

Mardi nodded. 'Yes,' she said, 'I think that's what it all means.'

I thought some more. 'It would have been easy for her to know what was going on,' I said. 'All the things she knew to tell me over the 'phone came from keeping her ears open and listening in to Lu's talk with his boys. I dare say she had ample opportunity of doing that. Then again she's rich, I take it, and ten grand would have been peanut money for her to get rid of Lu.'

Mardi stubbed out her cigarette. 'She's crazy about the men. She's running Curtis now. He's working for Lu, as you know, and I guess he told her all she wanted to know.'

I suddenly thought of Kennedy. Was he an old flame of hers? I guessed I was getting near to the truth.

'Well,' I said, 'this is going to get her nowhere. I'm through, so she can whistle for another goat.'

Mardi fixed her big eyes on me. 'You don't know Sarah Spencer,' she said quietly. 'I'm scared. She won't let you go as easily as that.'

I grinned at her. 'Don't you worry your head,' I said. 'No dame's goin' to rush me into somethin' I ain't keen about.'

'Please don't. . . .' She looked so scared that I got up and went over to sit on the bed.

'Now take it easy,' I said, putting my hand on hers. 'Just take it easy.'

She said, 'But you don't know her. She's dangerous. She won't stop at anything.'

I liked the feel of her hand in mine. I took each finger in turn between my finger and thumb and gently pressed her nails. 'Suppose we wait an' see,' I said. 'It's no good getting steamed up before anythin' starts. Now forget about it, honey, we got other things to think about. I've gotta make plans. What are we goin' to do with you?'

She was quite content to leave her hand in mind. We sat there looking at each other, and when she saw I wasn't worrying she relaxed and smiled at me.

'You're good to have around, Nick,' she said. 'I guess I'd be in a bad spot without you.'

'I'd like you to be around aways.'

She shook her head. 'Don't say that,' she said, taking her hand away. 'You don't have to say it.'

'I know. I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. I've tried to get you out of my system, but you stick. I guess this sounds cockeyed to you, but I want to go on with you.' I stopped because I just couldn't get the words out.

She saw what I meant all right. She said very softly, 'What about me? Do you think—'

'I'm thinking about you. I wouldn't've started this if I hadn't've been thinking about you. It's because of you that I want you and me to go on. I think you and I could go on—'

I got up. It was no use. I couldn't put it over. I guess I regretted being what I was for the first time in my life. I regretted all the other dames. I regretted almost everything.

I went over to the window and looked out. The silence in the room made me think of a church. Then she said, 'Nick. . . .' She was crying.

I went over to her and put my arms round her. I didn't say anything. I just put my arms round her and held her. She cried against my silk dressing-gown. I could feel her body trembling.

'Be kind to me,' she said. 'We are going to have a strange life together.'

When she said that, I felt good. It was like coming through a bad storm, shutting the door on the wind and the rain and knowing that it was quiet inside.

I shifted my position so that I lay beside her, and she put her head on my shoulder. Her soft hair touched my face and I held both her hands in mine.

When she had stopped crying and was quite calm again, I said, 'Suppose we go an' get married quick? Would you like that?'

She stayed so still, after I had said that, that I thought she had not heard me, but I just waited, wondering how it would all come out and if she really wanted me. She sighed then, and relaxed.

'Would you say a thing like that if you didn't really mean it?' she said at last, leaning away from me so that she could look up at my face. Her eyes were very bright and her lips were parted, and behind the brightness of her eyes I could see she was scared.

I said, 'No, I wouldn't. It's how I want it to be.'

She shook her head. 'You're crazy, Nick. You don't want to marry me.'

'I know why you say that. You think I'm just like the rest. You don't know me yet.'

'No – I do know you. It's not because of you, it's because of me. What do you know of me? How can you—'

I grinned down at her. 'I know you're swell an' I want you. Let's be nice to each other, honey – we'll get along.'

She gripped my hands hard. 'You mean you'll marry me? You'll marry me?'

'What is it, baby?' I didn't get her angle. She seemed scared that I'd change my mind. This was crazy to me, because I thought I was the one to be getting scared.

She smiled suddenly. 'You haven't kissed me yet.'

'I will if you'll marry me.'

'Kiss me, then.'

And that's how it was.

It was over an hour after, when we got down to the first stage of making plans and wondering what we were going to do, that I remembered Kennedy. Why I hadn't remembered that guy before beat me. Right there I had the solution to everything.

I said, 'I've got the place. You'll be tickled to death with it.'

She said, 'Where?'

And I told her. She sat there, her eyes rather wide, not saying anything until I had finished. Then she shook her head. 'No, Nick, we couldn't go there.'

I got off the bed. 'You don't know the place,' I said. 'You wait until you've seen it.'

She put out her hand. 'No, I mean that. I couldn't meet anyone just yet.'

'I ain't asking you to meet anyone. No one will be there. Kennedy will be away. We'll have it to ourselves.'

When I said that she relaxed. 'You must make sure,' she said.

After four unsuccessful 'phone-calls, I tracked the Colonel down and I told him how things were. Kennedy was an all-right guy. He was mighty pleased.

'Sure,' he said, 'you go ahead. I've got out of the lodge now and you can have it. Yes, you go ahead. I'll fix everything for you, an' you stay there as long as you like.'

I told him what a regular fellow he was, but he just laughed it away. 'Forget it,' he said. 'You have your honeymoon and enjoy yourselves. I'm glad you've got a girl; it's what you've been wanting.'

We did a bit more back-slapping and then I put the receiver on the prong. I looked over at Mardi. She didn't have to be told, she saw it all right. 'I said so, didn't I?'

She spread her hands helplessly. 'Oh, I want it to be true,' she said, 'I want it to be true.'

'You stay there until I get dressed. Then I'll go out and make it true,' I told her. 'We'll get this wedding fixed and then we'll go out to the lodge.'

She sat up in bed. 'I don't want you to leave me,' she said quickly, her eyes looking scared. 'Not now I know. Don't leave me, Nick.'

I patted her arm. 'Look, I'll fix it with Ackie. Then we can both stay right here and let him do it all.'

She said, 'Yes, do it that way,' and her eyes lost the scared look.

I went over to the telephone and got hold of Ackie. I thought it would give him a shock. It did.

He said, 'Hold everythin. I've gotta see this jane first. Now for Gawd's sake hold everythin' until I get right over.'

I hung up and grinned at Mardi. 'He certainly is excited,' I said. 'He's coming right on up.'

Mardi scrambled out of bed. 'Run away, Nick,' she said, 'I want to get dressed.'

Before I went into the next room I kissed her. Then I went off and got dressed myself. I was feeling swell. I felt like I could jump over the Empire State building.

I'd just finished dressing when Ackie blew in. He stood in the doorway, his monkey face looking worried. He said, 'Where is she?'

I jerked my head to the door. 'She won't be long,' I told him. 'She's getting dressed.'

'Now listen, Nick,' he said, coming over to me. 'What is all this? You don't mean you're really gettin' married?'

I thumped him on his chest. 'You bet I am,' I said, 'and you've got to fix it for us.'

He lowered his voice. 'She holdin' you up?'

'What do you mean . . . holdin' me up?'

He looked furtive. 'You know . . . she ain't in trouble?'

'Now listen, you gutter-minded monkey, Mardi an' me are like this.' I crossed my fingers. 'I'm marrying her because it's the one thing I can do that I want to do. Now do you get it?'

He walked slowly away from me. 'You mean you want to marry this jane?' He sounded incredulous.

'Yeah.'

'And you want me to help you?'

'That's right.'

'Well, by Heck! I guess you're nuts.'

Just then Mardi came out. She stood in the doorway and Ackie got an eyeful. She certainly looked the cutest thing, with her big smoky eyes and her smile. Ackie just gaped. Then he looked at me. 'Well,' he said.

'Now do you get the idea?' I asked.

He shook his head mournfully. He went over to Mardi. 'You poor little thing,' he said, shaking hands. 'What a break. You don't know what you're doing. You can't marry this guy . . . he ain't fit to marry anyone.'

Mardi just laughed at him. 'Are you going to help us?' she asked.

'You really want to get linked up with this heel?'

'He is rather nice. You don't know him as well as I do.'

Ackie looked at me over his shoulder. 'You've done a nice job grabbin' yourself this one,' he said. 'Why, sure, if I can help you, just count on me.'

I fetched a bottle of Scotch and we two had a couple of quick ones. I said to Mardi, 'Honey, while I talk with Mo, would you like to put my things together?'

I showed her where my grips were and left her sorting out my clothes. I got Ackie in a huddle. I told him the whole story, and he just sat there drinking it in along with my Scotch. When I had finished he heaved a sigh.'That's a swell story,' he said. 'Maybe when you've been bumped off I can print it.'

A nice comforting sort of a guy to have around.

'There ain't goin' to be any bumpin',' I said sharply. 'I'm goin' to get under cover and I'm goin' to stay that way for a little while. Kennedy's let me have his lodge. We plan to get married right away and then move on over there.'

Ackie scratched his head. 'It beats me how you do it. How you get a swell jane like that to have anythin' to do with you beats me. You certainly know how to look after yourself.'

I gave him some money. 'Go along an' see how quickly you can fix things. We'll go over to the Belmont Hotel until everything's fixed. I ain't too keen to be hanging around here. You get goin' and then come on over to the hotel.'

I gave him another drink and he went in to say 'good-bye' to Mardi. Ackie was an all-right guy, and I could see he was pleased that I'd got Mardi. It was just his way of putting things.

Mardi was sweet with him and he went off looking like the cat that got the cream.

I stood around watching Mardi pack. She made a swell job of it.

'How'd you like bein' a wife?' I said, sitting on my heels beside her.

'You mean doin' all this?' She paused and looked at me over her shoulder.

'That's right.'

She closed the grip and sat on it so she could get the locks shut. I helped her. 'I want to be good,' she said seriously. 'I want to do everything for you.'

I laughed. 'You be careful. You might be changing your mind.'

We got the things together at last and I sent for the porter to take them down. Then I arranged to square up for the rent, and that was the finish of my apartment.

'I guess we can go,' I said, looking round the room.

'Everything's down. Put your wrap on and we'll go to the station and pick up your things.'

She said, 'I won't be a minute.'

When she had gone into the other room someone knocked on the outer door. I thought it was the porter, so I just yelled out for him to come on in. The door opened and Blondie stood there.

I've had some shocks in my time, but this one rang the bell. I couldn't say anything.

She stood there, looking at me, her eyes cold and suspicious. 'Movin' out, huh?' she said.

'What the hell do you want?'

She sidled into the room. 'You don't sound so pleased to see me, darlin',' she said. 'Didn't you say to come when I had somethin' to tell you?'

Keeping my voice down, and hoping Mardi wouldn't hear, I said, 'I ain't interested any more. You scram quick. I've had enough of your outfit for life.'

Just then Mardi came out. Blondie looked at her the same way a snake might look at its Christmas lunch. 'So,' she said.

I love a dame who talks like that.

Mardi went white. Not paper-white, but the blue-white of porcelain. She put one hand to her mouth and flinched away from Blondie.

I said sharply, 'Leave me for a moment. There's no need for you two to meet.'

Mardi turned and went back into the room.

Blondie said, 'Wait. . . .'

Mardi kept going and she shut the door.

Blondie turned on me. 'So that's how it is?' she said, her eyes brooding thunder and lightning.

'Save it,' I said tensely. I wasn't taking anything from this dame. 'On your way, Blondie, and make it snappy.'

She shook her head. 'You ain't getting away with it like this,' she said. 'I've got to have a little talk with you.'

I walked past her and threw open the door. 'If you ain't outside in two seconds, I'll toss you out,' I said.

At that moment the guy opposite me has to come out. He stood there, his eyes popping. I took no notice of him. I just waited for Blondie to take it on the lam.

She hesitated, but she knew she wasn't in the right place to start trouble. She walked slowly past me into the corridor. 'All right, you heel,' she said, 'I'll make plenty of trouble for you.'

'Save it,' I told her. 'I don't like you, and I never did. Keep away from me if you want to stay healthy, or else you'll run into a nasty shock.'

I stepped inside and shut the door.

Mardi was looking out of the window. I wondered if it were going to make any difference. When she heard me come in she turned and ran over to me.

'Is it all right?' she said.

I put my arms round her. 'That was Blondie. She's gone now. You see, we can't get away from this business until we get away from here. I'm sorry about it, honey, but she's gone. I guess we won't see her any more.'

Mardi put her hand against my face. 'I wish you had never started this,' she said. 'I wish—'

'Come on, honey,' I said, taking her arm, 'if I'd kept out of this I shouldn't have met you. We're goin' where it's good and where we can forget all about the whole business . . . you see.'

And looking back, I guess that was about the dumbest crack I've ever made.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TROUBLE started four days after we had settled down at the lodge. They were four of the grandest days I ever spent. We had the place to ourselves and we did just what we liked. We dressed how we liked and we ate when we wanted to. We got up when we had had enough of bed, and we fooled around with fishing-lines until we had had enough of that. It was too good to last.

The first sign of trouble came with the postman. I got three articles returned. I couldn't believe my eyes. I sat there staring at them and looking at the printed rejection slips. I had had enough of them in the past to know what they were without reading the blah.

Mardi came in from the kitchen carrying a tray. She stood still when she saw my face, then she put the tray down and came over. 'What is it?'

I said I didn't know. I said maybe there was a mistake or something.

She said, 'But what is it?'

I showed her the rejection slips. She stood reading them, her brow wrinkled. 'Perhaps they weren't good enough,' she said at last.

I said I thought maybe that was it. But I knew it wasn't. Something had gone wrong and I didn't like it. I had been feeding these papers with stuff for years and they had grabbed everything I had given them. Now, without a word, they turned me down.

I said, 'Listen, honey, we gotta go slow for a bit. I was banking on this stuff to get us by for a couple of weeks.'

She looked at me seriously. 'You mean you are short of money?'

I shrugged. 'Well, yes . . . I guess that's about right.'

'Is that all? Are you sure that's all?'

It was enough, but I didn't want to worry her. 'Yeah, that's all . . . I'll be just a little short.'

She put her arm round my shoulders. 'We'll get by,' she said. 'Don't you worry. We don't have to have a lot of money.'

When we got through breakfast I went off to the study and thought things over. I checked my bank deposit and found I was shorter than I imagined. This was getting me worried. I put through a long-distance 'phone call to one of the editors.

When I got him on the line at last I said, 'What's the big idea sending my stuff back?'

'What do you mean?' He sounded curt.

'Look, Johnson, this ain't the way to treat me,' I said. 'I've done some good work for you. If you didn't like that article, why not write and tell me what's wrong with it?'

'I'm sorry, Mason, we don't want any more of your stuff. We're looking round for new talent.'

I said, 'You don't have to give me this bull. I've been a good friend of yours, Buddy. Why not give it to me straight? I can take it.'

He said very quietly into the 'phone, 'Suppose you come up to town and we'll have lunch.'

I said, 'I'll do that,' and hung up.

I went out to find Mardi. She was in the suntrap, fixing some flowers.

'I gotta go up to town,' I said. 'It's about these articles. I gotta talk things over with the editor.'

She said, 'May I come with you? I mean, may I come up and look at the shops while you're busy?'

I shook my head. 'Not just yet, honey. I want you to keep out of sight for a little while. I'll be right back.'

She said, 'I'll have a nice supper for you.' I could see she didn't like being left, but she wasn't going to make things awkward. I put my arm around her. 'Can I bring you anything back?' I said.

She shook her head. 'We've got to save our money.'

I laughed. 'It ain't so bad as all that.'

'Isn't . . . not ain't.'

'You're the teacher.'

She looked at me anxiously. 'I don't nag you, do I?'

I grinned. 'Sure you do . . . all day an' most of the night.'

I got up to town around twelve o'clock. It seemed all wrong after the silence of the fishing-lodge. I went into a bar and bought myself a drink. After I had wasted a little time I went round to the *Globe* building.

Johnson was waiting for me outside the place. I thought that was funny, but I didn't say anything. The way he shipped me into a taxi made me think he was anxious not to be seen with me.

I said, 'You certainly gave me a surprise.'

He fidgeted with his tie. 'Yes, I'm mighty sorry about all this,' he said.

'All right. Let's have a drink first and tnen we can talk about it. You tell me, how're things with you?'

He shrugged a little. 'Oh, I'm making out all right.'

'And the wife?'

'Yes, she's fine.'

We rode the block in silence after that. I was beginning to get the jitters. We got out at a quiet restaurant off the main street that was unlikely to be crowded, and we made our way upstairs.

When we got settled, and after we had knocked back a few drinks, I thought it time for him to get down to things.

'Now, what is all this about?'

'Well, I'm darned sorry about this, Mason, but we just can't take any more of your stuff.'

'Can't or won't?'

He twiddled with his glass, and he wouldn't meet my eye. 'It's nothin' to do with me,' he explained hastily. 'I've had instructions from the old man.'

I sat back and let that one sink in. As I didn't say anything, he went on, 'I guess you've got yourself in bad somehow. The old man's put the bar up.'

'Did he say why?'

Johnson shook his head. 'He just sent me a note. You know the type of note he sends out: "Mr. Hawkin's compliments, and do not accept any further work from Mr. Nick Mason."'

I shrugged. 'I guess he's gone nuts,' I said. 'Here, have another drink.'

We got through the meal somehow and then Johnson took himself off. I could see he was mighty glad to get shot of me. I stayed on after he'd gone and thought about things. Then I paid the bill and went over to a telephone-booth. I rang the press-room and asked for Ackie.

'Listen, Ackie, am I barred?'

'Yeah,' he said, 'you're washed up. What can I do about it for you?'

I thought a moment. 'This is Spencer's idea of getting me out of town.'

'Looks like it.'

'I'm in a spot, Mo,' I said. 'I want some money.'

Ackie gave a groan. 'Hell! Is it as bad as that?'

'Well, I guess not as bad as all that. I can run for a couple of weeks, but I've gotta get some dough.'

'You can count on me. I'll let you have some.'

I grinned ruefully into the mouthpiece. 'That's swell of you, but I've gotta earn a livin'. You can't keep me and Mardi all your life.'

'Maybe it'll clear up by then, or maybe you'd better get moving.'

I said, 'I'll let you know,' and I hung up.

So I was barred. This was serious. I walked out into the street thinking. Spencer looked like getting his own way. I knew I was up against a powerful mob, and I knew when to quit. It looked to me right then that I'd better pack up and move to another State.

I was feeling pretty low by the time I got back to the fishing-lodge. I didn't want to worry Mardi, but at the same time I wanted her to know just how I stood. I didn't know how far Spencer's influence carried. He was rich enough to carry weight with all the nationals. If the bosses had shares in this phoney business, they'd be glad to give him my head on a plate.

I walked up the drive, after I had parked the car in the garage. There was no sign of Mardi. I went quietly so that I should surprise her.

On my way up-town I'd got her two pairs of silk stockings. I'd felt pretty mushy buying them, but once I got clear of the shop I was glad. I guessed she would be pleased, because up to now I hadn't bought her anything.

I beetled into the hall and made for the kitchen. She wasn't there. So I went into the dining-room. The light was burning, but she wasn't there either. I was just going upstairs when I saw something that brought me up short.

I stood there feeling cold chills running through me, and a sick feeling gathering inside me. I tried to kid myself that the two dark stains at my feet were paint stains, but I knew they weren't. Slowly, I knelt down and touched one of them with my finger-tips. It was wet and sticky.

I stood up, looking at my fingers in the electric light. They were a bright red. Without knowing what I was doing I walked into the kitchen and let the water from the sink tap run over my hands. Deliberately I took a towel and wiped them dry.

I was so scared and sick that I was afraid to do anything else. I just stood there holding the towel, sweating ice. I heard myself say out loud: 'Don't let them have killed her . . . don't let them have killed her . . . please, God, . . . don't let them have killed her.'

I told myself I'd have to go and look. I had to go upstairs and see where she was, but that's as far as I could go. Nothing would get me out of the kitchen and upstairs.

I put the towel away after folding it carefully. I had to do something. I went back to the middle of the kitchen and stood there waiting. I said to myself that Mardi would come in in a moment from the garden, but I knew she wouldn't. Katz had found her, and he had killed her; that I knew was what had happened, but I wouldn't let myself believe it. I kept saying she'd be along in a moment or so, that the stuff on the floor outside was paint, it just couldn't be Mardi's blood, but I knew it was.

Then I thought of her all alone when Katz came. I could see her against the wall, her big, smoky eyes very wide, but her chin up. That would be the way she'd face up to Katz. She'd be thinking of me, and all the time she was going away from me I was talking to that bastard Johnson. I was worrying about dough when Mardi was being killed.

The sick feeling inside me began to ease a little, and the first shock gave way to a numbed feeling at the back of my brain. I went outside and stood looking at the bloodstains in the sitting-room. They were near the wall. When I looked closer I could see two bruises on the paint on the wainscoting. They looked like two heel marks. I could picture Mardi trying to press herself into the wall as Katz came at her. It made me feel so bad that I had to sit down.

Then I did a thing I'd never done since I was a kid. I didn't know I was doing it until I tasted the salt in my mouth. Going on like this wouldn't get me anywhere so I got up and gave myself a shot of Scotch. I took three-quarters of a tumbler and it went down like water. I guess it did the trick all right, because I got a grip on myself and I began to use my brain.

I went over to the telephone and dialled. I knew I couldn't handle this on my own. I had to share this with someone.

I said to Ackie: 'Come on out here fast.'

That's the big thing about Ackie, he always knew when you wanted him bad. He didn't ask why, nor did he make excuses. I knew that he was right in the middle of going to press, but he just said: 'Keep your shirt on, I'm on my way,' and he hung up.

If he came fast he could make it in an hour. I knew I couldn't wait an hour before going upstairs. I went over to the sideboard and belted the Scotch again, then I decided to go on up and see.

I went into the hall and looked up the stairs. The lodge was silent. Standing there, facing the stairs, I realized how much Mardi meant to me. I began to walk forward. The stairs seemed to go on a long way. I couldn't hurry, but I kept on. When I reached the top I felt heavy in the legs, just as if I'd been walking through glue.

On the landing there were two bathrooms, two bedrooms and a dressing-room. All the five doors were shut. Mardi might be behind any one of these. I knew the most likely would be our bedroom, but I didn't try that first. I went into one of the bathrooms. She wasn't there. I left the door open and the light on and went into the dressing-room. She wasn't there either.

I went out on to the landing and stood looking at the other doors and I felt bad. It took me a little while before I could go on. This time I went to our bedroom. I turned the handle slowly and pushed the door open, then I put my hand round and turned on the light. I didn't go in at once. I just stood looking in.

I looked everywhere but at the bed, because I knew she would be there. Then I brought my eyes down to the bed. I felt the cold trickle of sweat running down my back.

There was a large stain on the white sheet, which was drawn over her face. I could see, from where I was standing, the small hills that marked her feet, her hands, her breasts, and her nose. The sheet was drawn tight and I could clearly see those small hills.

I leant against the doorpost and just looked. Then I began to hate Spencer and his wife and Katz and the fat guy and Gus and the whole hellish business as I had never hated anything before. I wanted to get close to them all and get my hands on them. I wanted to hurt and kill them all because of what they had done to me. I no longer cared what would happen to me. I just wanted to even things up, knew that I was just kidding myself, because if I did kill them all it wouldn't help me. It wouldn't bring Mardi back and it would never take the picture I had of her facing what she had faced alone.

If only I had been there with her we could have gone out together. I know she wouldn't have minded.

I didn't go into the room. I turned off the light and went downstairs again. In the sitting-room I sat down and fumbled for my cigarette-case. I noticed, as I struck a match, that my hands were very steady. I was a little surprised. I just sat there smoking with a blank mind until Ackie came.

I heard his car roaring up the drive and I went out to meet him. He had come faster than I thought. He was out of the car before I could get to the front door, and when he had a look at me he just pushed me back into the lodge and shut the front door.

'What is it, Nick?'

I opened and shut my mouth, but no sound came. I just stood looking at him.

He put his hand on my arm. His face had gone very grim. 'Mardi? Somethin' happened to Mardi?'

I took a deep breath. It was worse than I thought. It made it much more real to have to say it. I had to put out a big effort to get control of myself. I could feel the muscles in my stomach fluttering. 'They've killed her, Mo.' Well, it was out now.

Ackie didn't believe it. He pushed me into the sitting-room. 'They wouldn't do that,' he said. 'Get a grip on yourself, Nick. Come on an' have a drink. They wouldn't kill a kid like that.'

I grabbed him by the arm and swung him round. 'I tell you they've killed her, the swine. She's up there on the bed. Look . . . they killed her here. Look at the blood. Do you see that? That's hers. That's from her body. They killed her down here. They came on her when she was alone and the yellow curs killed her against the wall.'

Ackie took a look at the bloodstains. Then he shook his head. 'Take it easy,' he said, 'take it easy.'

I seized his coat-front in my fist and shook him. 'Don't say that to me!' I shouted at him. 'I tell you she's up there. . . .'

He hit me across the face with the flat of his hand very hard. I guess I wanted that. It shook me up and it hurt a lot, but it fixed me. I blinked at him and took my hand away. 'I'm sorry, Mo,' I said, stepping away from him. 'I guess I was excited.'

'Sure,' he said. 'Suppose we go up?'

With Ackie, I felt I could do it. We went upstairs quickly. I turned on the light in the bedroom and walked over to the bed.

I heard Ackie say: 'Good God!'

I pulled the sheet down with a steady hand. The floor seemed to rise up under me and I felt Ackie grab at my arm. We both stood staring.

Even in death Blondie looked hard and suspicious. Her glazed eyes were fixed in a terrified stare and the vivid paint on her mouth glistened in the electric light. A small bullet-hole just above her left breast told me how she had died.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ACKIE said: 'No . . . don't say anythin'. Let me think.'

I walked away from the bed. My brain was stiff.

Ackie put his hand on Blondie's arm, then took her wrist and raised it. I just stood there and watched him. 'She ain't been dead long,' he said. He covered her with the sheet and came away from the bed.

He said: 'We'll look in the other rooms.'

I stayed right there and let him do it. He came back after a while and shook his head. 'There's no one anywhere.'

I sat down.

'You see, they didn't kill her . . . they've only taken her away,' Ackie said.

He went out of the room again.

I repeated after him: 'They've only taken her away.' I guess I felt as bad as when I thought she was dead.

Ackie came back again with the Scotch and two glasses. He put the glasses down on the table and poured the whisky out carefully. Then he came over and put one of the glasses in my hand.

'If you want to get Mardi back you gotta snap out of it,' he said.

He was right.

'This is a frame-up, Nick,' he went on, 'the old gag again. The same stunt as they pulled on Vessi. Blondie knew too much so they knocked her off and planted her on you. The next thing you'll know is that the cops will roll up and make a pinch. They'll get away with it just like they got away with it the first time.'

He was right again.

I finished up my Scotch and got to my feet. My own danger didn't worry me, but if I were behind bars there was no one to find Mardi. I had to get this angle right first.

'You better keep out of this, Mo,' I said. 'I can't drag you into it.'

Ackie filled up his glass again. 'Forget it.'

'No . . . I mean that.'

'I'm in with you from now on. We're going to bust this thing wide open. We're going to get Mardi back and we're going to get Spencer on trial. We're going to find out what's at the bottom of the Mackenzie Fabrics, and when we've done all that we're going to write the grandest news story, and we're going to get someone to print it.'

I said: 'Do you mean that?'

'Yeah, I'm in on it, and you can't keep me out.'

I was glad to have Ackie with me. He was an all-right guy and a tough egg to have around when trouble starts.

'We gotta get this dame outta here first. We gotta do that quick. That'll spoil any frame-up they're hoping to slap on you.'

'How the hell are we going to do that?'

Ackie scratched his head. 'We'll take her out in my car and drop her somewhere.'

'It would be better to take her round to her own apartment and leave her there. In her profession she might've been knocked off by anyone.'

Ackie nodded. 'We'll do that.'

We had a couple of drinks, but they didn't do much good. Ackie got her hat and put it on her head. He pulled it down hard, so that it hid the glassy look in her eyes. He stood looking down at her. 'I guess she looks okay now,' he said, scratching his head.

'I'll be glad when we've got her out of here.'

Ackie nodded. 'I guess we'll get goin' right away. I bet you evens she stiffens on us before we get her there.'

'I've had enough grief for one night. I ain't taking bets with you.'

'Well, let's go.'

We sat Blondie up and adjusted the short fox-fur cape over her shoulders that we had found in the room. It hid the blood-stains all right.

Ackie said quickly: 'You'll have to carry her . . . she's too heavy for me.'

I put my arm round her waist and the other arm under her knees and lifted her off the bed. Make no mistake about it, that dame was heavy.

Ackie said: 'Don't be standoffish, madam, put your arm round his neck.'

I said: 'If you don't cut that line right out, I ain't goin'.'

Ackie rubbed his hand over his face. 'Jeeze, if I don't make a joke of it, I'll go nuts.'

'Well, go nuts, but cut that line out.'

Going downstairs I near dropped her. My teeth began to rattle in my head.

Ackie was coming down behind me. He had brought the bottle of Scotch, and every step down he took a quick drag at the bottle. He was getting cock-eyed as hell. I put Blondie down on a chair and took the bottle away from him. 'Listen, you punk,' I said evenly, 'you're supposed to be helpin' me. Will you get a grip on yourself an' help?'

'Sure,' he said, 'sure . . . you don't have to worry.'

Blondie suddenly stretched out her legs and began to slide off the chair. We both stood staring at her, unable to move. Ackie said, in a quavering voice: 'I don't think I'm goin' to stand a lot of this.'

Blondie sat down on the floor with a little bump and then flopped on her side. Her hat came off and one of her shoes.

Ackie sat on the stairs and hid his face. 'I think I'll commit suicide,' he said.

When I straightened her out I found her muscles were hardening. 'Quick, Mo,' I said, 'she's gettin' stiff.'

Ackie got up and gave me her hat. 'Maybe she'll be easier to handle that way,' he said hopefully.

I crammed the hat on her head again. 'Get hold of her knees . . . we'll never get her into the car.'

We carried her out into the dark night. I could only hear Ackie's heavy breathing and the sound of our feet crunching on the gravel. Overhead, the sky looked stormy. Big clouds raced across the face of the moon.

The car was a big six-seater, but it took us all our time getting her in. We got her fixed at last in the corner of the seat. In the dim light of the roof-lamp she looked good. No one would have known that she was dead.

Ackie said: 'That's a swell job.'

'You stay here . . . I've got to get her shoe.'

'If you think I'm staying out with her alone you're barmy,' he said with great feeling. 'We'll do this together or not at all.'

We turned out the light inside the car and went back inside the lodge.

'Before we go we'd better clean up this mess,' I said.

We did that. When we were through we had another drink and then turned out the lights and went out to the car.

'We'll toss who drives,' I said.

I won.

Ackie began to get in beside me. 'You get in the back . . . that's why we tossed,' I said. 'You see she doesn't fall over.'

'And I called you a pal of mine,' Ackie said. He stood hesitating, then he finally made up his mind. He opened the door and got in. 'Now be a good girl,' he said to Blondie.

I engaged the gear and rolled the car down the drive.

Ackie said after a while: 'She's sitting as quiet as quiet. I guess I could come on in the front.'

'You stay right there.'

'Listen, Bud, if I've gotta stay here I've got to have a drink. There's a pint just by your hand . . . pass it over.'

I groped around in the dashboard cupboard and found a bottle. I passed it over to him.

'You ain't got much gas,' I said, looking at the gauge. 'That's careless of you, Mo. I shall have to stop and get some.'

Ackie didn't say anything for a minute . . . I guessed he was giving himself a shot. Then he said: 'That's your funeral, Bud, me an' the girl friend'll leave all that to you.'

I said: 'For Pete's sake keep as sober as you can.'

'If you were right here, you'd try an' get as tight as a tick . . . that's what keeps me from goin' crackers. How'd you like to be sitting next to a corpse? She's looking at me all the time. I'm tellin' you, this dame just can't see enough of me. It's givin' me the heebies.'

'Aw, shut up,' I said, and concentrated on the dark road. After a little while Ackie began to sing. I couldn't stand that. I took my foot off the gas-pedal and stamped on the brake. I twisted round in the seat. 'For suffering in silence,' I said, 'will you lay off it?'

'She likes it,' Ackie said. 'You ask her an' see.'

I switched on the light inside the car. Ackie was crouched up on the far side away from Blondie, his face the colour of a fish's belly and his eyes popping. I reached out a hand and took the bottle away from him. He'd been working on it. There was only just one small drink left, and I had it. I tossed the bottle off the road.

'Take it easy,' I said; 'for Pete's sake take it easy.'

'Sure . . . you just go on . . . we're fine here. I tell you we're fine.'

I started the car rolling again. The gas was getting low and I couldn't risk running out on a well-lit road. I'd have to take some on board at the nearest hick station.

I didn't have to go far before I sighted one. I slowed down.

'I've got to pull in for some gas,' I said. 'Keep quiet an' don't start anything.'

'Start anything? Don't make me laugh. Blondie an' me are playin' at graves.'

I wished Ackie had kept away from the bottle. In this state he was likely to land us all in a jam. When I thought of Blondie sitting right behind me, I sweated some.

I swung the big car into the narrow station and killed the engine. An old guy came out with a goatee beard. So that he didn't get too close to the car I stepped out.

'Give me ten,' I said briefly.

As he was adjusting the dial a motor-cycle came banging up out of the darkness. When I saw the dim outline of the stetson hat I stiffened. It was a State trooper.

I said to the old guy, 'Snap into it, Buddy, I'm rushed.'

The State trooper dismounted and wandered into the light. I recognized him. He was a guy named Flanaghan. I'd known him in my cub days. Although I tried to duck into the shadows he recognized me.

'Ain't you Mason?' he said, peering at me.

I gave him my hand. 'Well, well,' I said, pump-handling him. 'Ain't it a small world?'

I'm glad that guy couldn't read my thoughts. He was a nice social fellow and he might have had a shock.

'What are you doin' around here?' he asked after we had got through with the back-slapping.

'Been staying at Colonel Kennedy's lodge,' I told him. 'Just taking a run into town.'

He glanced over at the car. At that minute Ackie rolled the window down and stuck his head out. 'Hey, Nick,' he bawled, 'watch this dame.'

Flanaghan took a step forward. 'Well, if it ain't that old son-of-a-gun from the *Globe*,' he said.

Ackie gaped at him. 'H'yah,' he said feebly. 'Who thought you'd be around?'

'Who's the dame?' Flanaghan asked. He had always been a great guy for the dames.

Ackie glanced at me. This had sobered him a little. 'You don't have to worry about her,' he said, keeping his voice down. 'She's cock-eyed.'

'How do you mean, cock-eyed? You mean she's stiff?'

Ackie jerked his head at me. 'Did you tell him?' he asked in a croaking voice.

I said, 'Mo means she's a little tight.'

There was an awkward silence, then Flanaghan said, 'I hope you boys ain't up to no dirty work.'

Ackie withdrew into the car and sat down. Past his shoulder I could see Blondie's big hat. I felt the sweat trickling down my back. 'You know how it is,' I said. 'She ain't used to our drinking and she took a little too much. We're taking her right home to sleep it off.'

Ackie moved over to Blondie and put his arm round her. I guess that guy was still pretty high.

Flanaghan stepped round me and peered into the car. Ackie took a quick look at him over his shoulder and moved closer to Blondie. He effectively screened Blondie from Flanaghan.

He said in a loud voice, 'Hey! Wake up, honey. There's a cop askin' after your health.'

I took off my hat and wiped my forehead.

Flanaghan pushed in closer.

'You all right, baby?' Ackie bawled.

Then out of the silence that followed a horrible soprano voice floated out of the car. 'Sure I'm all right. Tell the officer to go take a pill.'

With horrified fascination I saw Blondie nod her head twice and move her arm a little.

Satisfied, Flanaghan stepped back. 'I guess that dame's as stiff as a board,' he said. 'You'd better get her home.'

I shoved some money into the hand of the old guy and slid under the wheel. 'I'll be seeing you some time,' I called, and I engaged the gears. The car shot away from the service station fast, leaving Flanaghan scratching his head, looking after us.

Ackie said in a faint voice, 'You wouldn't call this dame a hot one now. I'm about frozen to death.'

I said, 'For the love of Mike keep quiet, you bum.'

We drove the rest of the way in silence. When we reached Blondie's apartment it started to rain. Big drops the size of nickels came splashing down on the street. That was the one break we had had on the journey. Rain as hard as this would keep the streets cleared.

I swung open the car door and climbed out. 'Wait until I get the door open,' I said.

Ackie said, 'Sure, leave me with the corpse every time.'

I went over to the front door. In the faint light I could just make out the glitter of the plate. I thought she wasn't going to need that any more. I only had a vague idea of how I was going to get in, but when I tried the handle the door opened. I stood hesitating, then I stepped inside. I ran up the stairs quickly to Blondie's room. There was no one in the bedroom and the room was in darkness.

Down I went again and called to Ackie. 'It's okay. We'll get her out.'

Ackie said, 'You get one side, I'll handle the other.'

We got her under the arms and ran across the pavement with her. I had to take her up the stairs, there wasn't room for the three of us. I can tell you when I reached her bedroom I was mighty glad.

Ackie said behind me, 'Put her in a chair. She'll sit more natural that way.'

Then the bathroom door opened quickly and Katz slid into the room. He took just one look at me and went for his gun.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

IF a guy pulls a rod on you in a small room and starts popping at you, there is only one thing to do, apart from saying your prayers.

I did the best I could do under the circumstances.

I dived across the room and landed on Katz. He tried to get his leg up to kick at me, but he was just too late. His rod jerked out of his hand and fell on the floor somewhere. I thought Ackie would be bright enough to collect it.

Katz got a grip round the barrel of my chest that surprised me. This guy looked like a thin dope, but he'd got plenty of what it takes. Before I could grab him, he had tossed me away so that I came down hard on Blondie. I was too rattled to care much about that, and as I scrambled to my feet Katz swung his legs round and caught me in a scissor-grip round the neck. I knew all about those sort of tricks, and I had his shoe off and was giving his big toe the works before he could start to put on any pressure.

'Sock into him,' Ackie yelled from the doorway. 'Give him hell, Buddy.'

It broke the hold all right, but I collected a stiff kick in the face as I was getting set to jump him. I was glad that the kick came from the foot without a shoe, otherwise I should have seen a few bright lights.

Anyway, I went over backwards and it gave Katz time to get off the bed, then I went for him again. I was remembering Mardi now, so I hit that guy hard where it would hurt him. It did. He flopped on the bed, his eyes glazing. I had him by his long hair and snapped another wallop to his jaw just to make sure. He went out like a light.

I stood over him, blowing on my knuckles.

'I was just beginning to enjoy it,' Ackie said. 'You shouldn't've washed him up that quick.'

I went round the bed and gathered Blondie up. She'd lost her hat, but she still looked as suspicious and hard as ever. I put her in the one armchair and made sure that she wouldn't fall forward.

Ackie leant against the doorpost watching. 'Gee! This looks like one of those horror plays,' he said, jerking his head at Katz, lying flat on the bed, and then over to Blondie.

'I've got to get this guy round. I want him to talk,' I said. 'Lend me a hand, Mo; we'll tie him up first in case he starts trouble.'

Ackie's face brightened. 'You goin' to give him the works?' he asked.

'Yeah, I'm going to give it to him until he's come as clean as Aimee's surplice.'

Ackie scratched his head. 'You're sure headin' for trouble. This guy's the bad man of the town. He'll start something which might come awkward.'

I didn't bother to answer. I knew that things would start to hum pretty soon, and as long as I was making them hum I didn't care. I ran through Katz's pockets. The first thing I turned up was a roll of money. I didn't have to count it. I knew that it was the five grand that Blondie had lifted off me. I showed the roll to Ackie. 'That's why he was up here,' I said. 'Just lining his pocket, the yellow punk.'

'You keepin' it?'

I shook my head. 'I'm not takin' any chances. I'll leave it where I found it. If the cops are looking for me, that would be a fine one to pin on me.'

'You think of everything, don't you?' Ackie looked at me admiringly. He was nearly sober by now, and I guess the drink was dying on him hard.

'Go into the bathroom and get some towels. I want to fix this bird.'

Ackie came back after a moment with a couple of towels. 'Nice joint this, ain't it?' he said.

I grunted and took the towels from him. I tore them in two and trussed Katz. I made a good job of it. Ackie leant over the bed-rail and watched. I knew Ackie was scared, but he wasn't saying anything. He just stood and watched. I knew he was thinking that if we didn't get away with this, we were going to get into a pretty tight jam. I thought it mighty white of him to come in with me.

I hauled off and slapped Katz across the face twice. He moved his head, muttered and then opened his eyes. As soon as he saw me he sat up. I put my hand over his face and slammed him back on the bed. Even though he was just coming to the surface he'd got enough savvy to try and bite me.

'Get a grip on yourself,' I told him, 'I want you to do a little talking. If you're smart, you'll start right away, but if you think you can get away with anything you're going to get the works.'

Katz drew his breath in with a sharp little hiss. His eyes half closed and his mouth became a slit in his white face. 'You're crazy to start this, Mason,' he said. 'Why, you punk, you sure must be crazy to think you can get away with this.'

I was in no mood to talk turkey to this guy. As I hit him a thin trickle of blood came from his nose and ran down to the side of his mouth. He put his tongue out and carefully licked his lips. I guess that guy hated me as much as he could hate anyone.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, close to him. 'I don't care if I have to rip you to bits,' I said, speaking softly, 'but you're going to talk. Where's my wife? Where's Mardi Jackson?'

He didn't know. I felt a cold chill of disappointment grip me when I saw the expression in his eyes. He didn't say anything, but I knew he wasn't bluffing. The question had come as a surprise, I could tell that.

'All right,' I said, 'I'll try again. What's behind the Mackenzie racket?'

This time he shifted his eyes. 'You go to hell,' he said. 'You ain't makin' me talk.'

I said to Ackie, 'Sit on his legs.'

Ackie came round the bed like I'd asked him to sit on a rattlesnake. He didn't look at Katz, but he pinned him just the same. I jerked off Katz's sock and looked at him. 'When you're ready to talk, just let me know,' I said, 'I ain't in no hurry.'

I took a cigarette from my case and lit it. When the end was glowing, I took it out of my mouth and brought it near his foot. If Ackie hadn't been sitting on him. I guess that guy would have bounced off the ceiling. I guess these tough guys are all the same. He just curled up, the sweat jumping out of his face.

'Okay . . . okay . . .' he said hoarsely. 'I'll talk.'

'There's your rattlesnake,' I said to Ackie. 'Just yellow right through.'

Ackie stood up and sneered. 'Why, you punk,' he said, 'we ain't even started on you yet.'

'Leave him alone, Mo. You talk rough to this guy an' he'll take his hair down and weep.'

Katz just lay on the bed glaring at us.

I threw the cigarette into the fireplace. 'Come on,' I said, 'what's behind the Mackenzie racket?'

It took some time to drag it out of him, but I got it out of him at last. The set-up was simple once you got the key.

The Mackenzie Fabric Inc. was an enormous clearing-house for stolen goods. It worked like this: with the big imports from China and England of clothes and silks, all kinds of stolen articles were smuggled in the bales. In the same way articles stolen in America could be shipped out to the various continental agencies representing Mackenzie Fabrics abroad.

Spencer was the big shot. It was his job to buy or to sell whatever came into his hands from the various gangs operating throughout the States. With most of the high officials getting a rake-off in the form of dividends, the racket was watertight.

I knew that once Katz got free he'd stop at nothing to finish us both. We knew too much now ever to be safe. There was only one way and that was to see that Katz was under cover long enough to give me the time to bust the racket.

I didn't fancy knocking him off in cold blood, but at the moment I couldn't see what else I could do. Ackie was watching me and he understood what I was thinking about.

'Leave it to me,' he said, 'I guess it'd be easy to frame him for twenty-four hours.'

I looked at him hard. 'Twenty-four hours ain't so long,' I said. 'It's going to take most of that to get into action.'

Ackie shrugged. 'That's as long as we can hold him, I guess,' he said. 'We just gotta make things move.'

The longer we argued about it the more time we wasted, so I let Ackie go ahead with his idea.

'We get this bird down to the station house and book him under assault. I can tip the sergeant to keep him under cover for a bit. He's a pal of mine an' he'd lose a rat like that for a little while.'

I stood up. 'Okay . . . let's go.'

Katz wasn't putting up a beef. He went with us down the stairs, his hands still tied behind him. Ackie went first, then Katz and then I followed. Before leaving the room I made certain that we'd left no tell-tale clues that might hook us up with Blondie's death, then with one last look at the still figure in the chair I snapped off the light and followed Katz down.

When we got to the street door I rammed his gun into his back. 'Don't start anything, brother,' I said. 'We've got nothing to lose and I'd like the chance of putting a slug into you.'

He hobbled across the pavement and got into the car. I got in beside him and Ackie got under the wheel.

'If there's any liquor left,' I said, 'I guess a slug apiece wouldn't come hard.'

Ackie groped around and shook his head. 'There ain't none,' he said dispiritedly. 'Ain't that hell?'

'Well, go on ... the sooner we get this bird put away the better.'

During the run to the station house I was busy thinking. The first thing I'd got to do was to find Mardi. Nothing else mattered as long as I found her. Then I'd got to find enough evidence to bust up Spencer. If I wanted a clear field I'd gotta do that within twenty-four hours. Not an easy programme, but I guess I had to do it.

If Spencer hadn't kidnapped Mardi, who had? I might be wrong thinking that Spencer hadn't done it, but Katz hadn't known anything about it, and Katz was Spencer's right-hand man. Maybe the fat guy and Gus had pulled it, but even then Katz would have known about it. And that was one thing I was sure about. Katz knew nothing about it at all.

I suddenly remembered. I could see Mardi's frightened face and I remembered what she had said. 'You don't know Sarah Spencer. I'm scared. She's dangerous. She won't stop at anything.'

Sarah Spencer! I sat up. Was she at the bottom of all this? Was it she who had taken Mardi away from me? The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed to be. By the time we got to the station I was itching to get after that dame.

Ackie drove round to the back entrance and got out. 'You stay here,' he said. 'I want to see if the coast's clear.'

I looked at Katz and dug him in the ribs with the gun.

'You're soon going to have a nice long rest,' I said, 'an' I hope you'll have plenty to think about.'

Without looking at me, he said, 'You won't last long now, Mason. If you think you can buck this racket you're nuts. You're the nearest thing to a corpse I've ever put my eyes on.'

When he'd got that little lot off his chest, he laughed. Oh yes, this guy had got his nerve back, once he knew we weren't going to knock him off. I didn't like the sound of his laugh either.

Ackie came out and jerked his head. 'I'm glad I went in,' he said, keeping his voice down. 'Lazard was in there. The smartest mouthpiece in town. If he'd spotted this guy coming in, he'd have sprung him so fast he'd've made you dizzy.'

I looked at Katz uneasily. A lot depended on keeping this guy out of mischief.

'Where's this Lazard now?' I asked.

'He's just comin' out. We'll wait until he's scrammed, then we'll go on in.'

While Ackie was saying this, I saw a figure come out through the rear exit. A short, fat figure with a large gallon hat on his head. Katz saw him the same time as I did and he let out a hell of a squawk.

I spun round and hit him as hard as I could. I guess Katz was expecting it because he ducked down and my fist crashed against the bony structure of his forehead. It felt like I had hit a brick wall and a white-hot pain shot up my arm. The force of the punch stunned Katz and he sank limply against the cushions of the car.

Ackie said softly, 'He's comin' over.'

Lazard had heard the squawk and he stood listening; then he moved cautiously towards us. Ackie took a step or two from the car to intercept him.

'What's goin' on here?' Lazard asked.

Ackie stood square in his way. 'Nothin' that'd interest you,' he said shortly. 'Suppose you drift, brother. I don't like you guys askin' questions.'

Lazard peered at him. 'Why, Ackie,' he said, 'what the hell are you doin' here?'

'Scram, brother,' Ackie said patiently. 'You're in the way.'

This guy Lazard was smart all right. He said with a little grit in his voice: 'If you're holdin' someone against their will, I guess it is something to interest me.'

Katz was coming out of his trance. I said very softly to him, 'One yap from you, an' I'm goin' to wrap this gun around your mug.'

In the meantime Lazard was trying to edge round Ackie. They looked like they were going into a slow motion of an African dance. Ackie got mad suddenly. 'If you don't scram,' he said suddenly, 'I'm going to do things to you.'

The threat in his voice brought Lazard up short. He took two steps back quickly. 'I guess you're drunk,' he said. 'You be careful, you can get into a lot of grief being that way.'

He stood hesitating for a moment, then he turned and walked away.

We stood and watched him go in silence, then I relaxed a little. I wiped off my hands on the sides of my coat. 'I don't like that, Mo,' I said.

Ackie cursed a little. 'We gotta watch that guy. I'll go in and fix the sergeant. You wait here.'

He didn't take long and he came back again with a hard grin on his face. 'It's okay,' he said. 'Bring him in.'

We got Katz out of the car and ran him over to the station house. Not until I'd got him inside did I feel at all easy, even then, I wondered if it would be better to take him to the other station house on Riverside.

The desk sergeant came out of an adjoining room and nodded at me. He was a big, red-faced Mick, with a cold, hard eye.

Ackie said, 'Get this bird under cover . . . Lazard may come back.'

The sergeant looked at Katz. 'I've always wanted to get my hands on you,' he said. 'Bring him in here.' He kicked open another door and led the way down a long passage.

Katz suddenly bent double, swung round, and made a dash for the street door. I was expecting it, but I didn't expect him to move so quickly. He nearly got away. He got to the door and, just as he was passing through, I collared him round the knees. We went down together with a crash.

The sergeant was close behind me and together we dragged Katz back into the station house. Katz fought like a madman and yelled at the top of his voice.

I managed to step clear for a second and I hit him on the point of his jaw. He went slack. The sergeant dragged him down the passage, down some stone steps, into a large bare room.

Ackie came in a minute or two after, looking worried. 'Lazard saw all that,' he said, 'I spotted him across the road.'

The sergeant was furious. He took hold of Katz and shook him this way and that. Then he dumped him like a sack of coal on the floor.

Ackie said to him, 'Lazard'll get him out, Pat, if you give him the slightest chance.'

The sergeant shook his head. 'This guy'll stay right here until this time tomorrow,' he said. 'No one comes down here. I've got the key and the rat can bawl till he busts . . . no one'll hear him.'

I said, 'I guess we'll leave you to play with him. We'll be along tomorrow night to charge him.'

The sergeant didn't even hear me, he was moving slowly towards Katz, his fists held a little forward and a deep growling sound coming way down in his chest.

Ackie and I stepped outside the room, shutting the door on a sudden terrified howl that sprang from Katz's throat.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ACKIE said: 'That starts it, Nick. We gotta go ahead now.'

'You think Lazard'll try an' spring him?'

'I guess he'll see Spencer. A guy like that always jumps into anything with both feet.'

I went over to the car. 'Listen, Mo, we gotta break this business up fast, before they get him out. You go to the Federal Bureau an' tell 'em everything. Get the sergeant to turn Katz over to the Bureau tonight. Once they've got him, Lazard won't get to the first base.'

Ackie pushed his hat to the back of his head. 'What are you going to do?'

'I'm lookin' for Mardi,' I said grimly.

'Yeah – but where? You just can't run around in circles. You gotta have some system.'

'I ain't had time to get round to Sarah Spencer with you yet,' I said. 'I'm makin' a guess, but I'll swear I'm right. She's got Mardi hidden up.'

I told Ackie the tale as far as I knew it myself. What Mardi had told me, and how we had fitted Sarah into the set-up, and why I thought she had kidnapped Mardi. 'She's gettin' desperate,' I concluded. 'I'm bettin' she's bankin' on me startin' a lot of trouble as soon as Mardi disappeared. She's right, but she ain't goin' to sit on the fence any more. I'm goin' to push her off, and let her have some trouble for herself.'

Ackie listened with his jaw slack. When I had finished, he shook his head. 'No – it don't fit,' he said. 'Sarah Spencer ain't got it in her to pull a job like that. I've seen her, you ain't. She's just a dizzy blonde, with the brain of a cow an' the morals of an alley-cat. 'Sides, she's crazy about Spencer – I can't believe that tale.'

I shrugged. 'You don't know everythin', Mo,' I said shortly. 'Anyway, I'm goin' to have a look at this dame – I might find somethin'.'

Ackie screwed up his face, but he didn't say anything. I could see he thought I was up the wrong alley, but I told myself that I had to start somewhere. If Sarah Spencer was the woman on the 'phone, she'd have to tell me a few things before I was satisfied that she hadn't had something to do with Mardi's kidnapping.

I gave him a little push. 'You've got to get goin',' I said, 'an' make it stick—'

Still Ackie didn't move. 'Just how much am I to tell these G-men?'

'Tell 'em everythin' Katz told us. That's enough. Don't bring Blondie into it, and don't mention Mardi. Just blow up the Mackenzie Fabric racket – that's all you gotta do.'

Ackie nodded. 'How far do you want to be in this?'

I thought it over. 'Yeah, you're right. Suppose you leave me right out of it. I might want to do a lot of running around, an' if I've gotta sit answerin' a lotta bull from the cops it might cramp me.'

Ackie began to drift. 'You take the car,' he said, 'I'll get a taxi. You'll take it easy, won't you, pal? Don't start anythin' you can't finish. That's a tough gang to play around with.'

I gave him a little shove. 'Don't worry about me,' I said, 'I'll watch out. When you're through with the cops, go back to the press-room – I'll contact you there.'

I climbed into the car and engaged the gear. Ackie stood at the corner of the street and raised his hand as I swept past him. Although I didn't know it, I wasn't going to see that guy for several weeks.

Spencer had a swell house on Parkside. It didn't take me long to get there, and I drew up on the opposite side and killed the engine. The house stood in about a couple of acres of grounds with a lot of trees and shrubs that more or less hid the house from the street.

I swung open the off door and got out. Crossing the street, I took a look at the big gates. I told myself I wasn't going to walk up the drive and ring on the bell. I was going to surprise that dame. Then something happened that surprised me. The electric horn on Ackie's car gave a strangled croak, just like someone had touched it gently. I looked over at the car quickly, my hand going to my hip pocket, where Katz's gun was. In the darkness, I could just make out someone sitting in the car.

Pulling the gun out, and holding it by my side, I crossed the street again. I moved with stiff legs, rather expecting a sudden blast of lead. Someone called softly as I got nearer. 'Nick – it's all right – Nick – it's me.'

It was her, too. Mardi was sitting crouched down in the car, peering at me through the open window with a white, scared face.

I stood there, holding on to the door of the car, looking at her. I just couldn't believe my eyes. I said, 'Mardi—'

'Yes – please get in. We must get away from here. Nick, get in quickly.' The urgency of her voice made me act. I pulled open the car door and slid under the wheel. I put my hands on her, and I could feel her trembling.

'But, honey – what happened? What are you doing here?' I said, putting my arm round her and pulling her to me.

With violence that startled me, she pulled herself away from me. 'Nick – don't talk. Get me away from here. . . .' she said. There was a high note of hysteria in her voice.

I leant forward and started the engine, then rolled the car down the street. I didn't move it fast, but kept it going. 'Where do you want to go, baby?' I said. 'Just take it easy, I'll take you wherever you want to go.'

She said, 'I'm so frightened, Nick, we must get far away. Don't talk now, but get me away – anywhere, but get me away.'

I shoved the pedal down and the car picked up speed. It was no use asking her questions when she was like this. Something bad must have happened to have got her so scared. I headed the car out of town. I sat holding the wheel, looking at the two bright pools of light thrown by the headlights ahead of me, and wondering what it was all about. I could feel Mardi shivering against me, but I didn't look at her. I thought the best thing was to let her calm down before I fussed her.

It wasn't until I had left the town some miles back, and got on to the desert road, that she began to relax. I could feel the tenseness going out of her body, and her shivering gradually stopped. I put out a hand and found one of hers and squeezed it. She was cold, but she gripped my hand hard, so I knew it was all right between us.

I said, 'Suppose we stop an' have a little talk, baby. We can't go on like this all night.'

She said, 'Don't stop, Nick – we've got to go further than this. Please go on.'

She leant against me and I put my arm around her.

I said, 'We'll go on, if you want to.'

And on we went. After a little while, Mardi fell asleep. I could feel her breathing softly on my hand. When I was sure she was sleeping heavily, I slackened speed. I didn't know where we were heading, and I didn't want to get landed somewhere without any gas. I'd got enough for some way yet, but I wanted to have a talk with her before we went much further.

The desert road runs for about a couple of hundred miles through sand and shrub, it links up with a small town called Plattsville, and then starts all over again to the Pacific. Just a long ribbon of road, straight, flat and monotonous, linking up small hick towns, like a string of badly spaced beads.

I checked the time. It was just after two o'clock. I reckoned that in about an hour I should run into Plattsville. I made up my mind, I wouldn't go further than Plattsville without finding out what was scaring Mardi. Maybe, after a sleep, she'd get a grip on herself.

I pushed the car along at a faster rate. At this time in the morning the wind nips off the desert, and I was beginning to feel cold. I was not only wanting a drink bad, but I was beginning to feel sleepy. I told myself that I'd stop at Plattsville whatever happened.

My guess that it would be about an hour's run was near enough. The hands of the dashboard clock stood at three-fifteen when I spotted the few street lights of Plattsville. I shoved the clutch out and ran the car to a stop by the side of the road. The little jerk woke Mardi, who sat up nervously.

'It's all right, baby,' I said quickly. 'We're running into a town. I thought maybe you'd like to talk things over with me before we go any further.'

She peered out of the window, then she turned round to me and put her hands on my arm. 'Oh, Nick, it's good to have you,' she said. Her voice was quite steady, and I knew she'd got her nerve back.

I lit a cigarette and gave her one. 'We've come a mighty long way,' I said. 'So you don't have to get scared any more.'

She shook her head. 'No, I'm all right now. I was so frightened, Nick. I wanted to get away. I don't want to go back. Promise me you'll not go back any more.'

I patted her arm. 'It's all right now. We've washed them up. You don't have to worry your head any more. We've turned the whole business over to the Federal Bureau to deal with—'

She clutched my arm. 'The whole business?' Once more her voice trembled. 'Do you have to be in it?'

'Now take it easy,' I said. 'I'm out. Ackie's doin' it all. You an' me are out of this.'

She drew a deep breath. 'I see,' she said.

I said, 'I must know what happened at the lodge.'

She turned her head and looked at me. 'Happened? Why, what do you mean? Happened?'

I shifted a little in my seat. 'Where were you? I got back to the lodge and you weren't there.'

She shivered. 'No – I got scared and ran away.'

'What scared you, honey? Where did you go to?'

'I don't want to talk about it, Nick. Can't we drive on now?'

I took her in my arms and pulled her round so she faced me. 'I'm sorry, baby, but this is serious,' I said. 'When I got back to the lodge I found you gone and Blondie dead.'

I felt her body stiffen. 'Dead? You mean someone killed her?'

I said, 'Yes . . . someone killed her.'

Mardi began to cry softly. 'Oh, Nick, and she came to warn me. She came and told me that they were coming for me. I was so scared that I ran out of the place into the woods and left her there. She said that Katz had told her that Spencer wanted us out of the way. He thought we knew too much and Katz was on his way to the lodge.'

I said, 'But Spencer didn't know we were at the lodge.'

She hid her head. 'He knows everything – I tell you he knows everything.'

I drew her to me. 'Well, it ain't goin' to do him much good now,' I said. 'When the Feds get on his tail that guy's going to have a bad time. Listen, baby, suppose we put up at this town until the gang's smashed up, then we can go back and get started again.'

She shook her head. 'I can't think now. Tell me about the woman . . . what happened, Nick? Have you told the police?'

I saw she wouldn't relax until I told her the whole story. So, leaving out the messy details, I told her how I had come back to the lodge, how I had thought it was she who had been killed, how I had found Blondie and the whole set-up. She sat, hiding her face from me, crying softly.

'That's how it was, honey,' I said. 'You ain't got anythin' to cry about. Maybe she did come an' warn you, but she had it comin' to her. Blondie was a tough baby, you don't have to mourn for her.'

Mardi put her handkerchief to her nose and looked at me with bright eyes. 'What made her come like that, Nick?' she asked. 'Why should she risk her life for – me?'

I leant forward and started the engine. 'Search me,' I said. 'I never would have thought she'd done a thing like that.'

As I began to roll the car, another thought struck me. 'How did you know I'd be goin' to Sarah Spencer's?'

'I had to take the chance – I didn't know, but I didn't know where else to look for you. I thought if you got back to the lodge and found me gone you'd come on to her place.'

'That's pretty cute of you, baby,' I said admiringly. 'That's pretty cute.'

We drove on after that in silence. I knew Mardi was still tense. I guessed the shock of hearing about Blondie's death had shaken her pretty badly. I was glad when we ran into Plattsville and found a hick hotel that we could stop at.

The guy behind the desk seemed three-quarters dead, but the other quarter was enough to get us a bedroom and me a drink. When we got left on our own, I hit that bottle as hard as most bottles can be hit. Mardi sank on to the big, old-fashioned bed, her head dropping with fatigue.

I took one look at her and made up my mind. 'You're going straight into the sheets an' sleep. I've gotta ring Ackie, then I'll be up. Come on, honey, I'll get you fixed first.'

She raised her head. 'It's all right, Nick, you go and 'phone. I can manage. You'll be quicker if you go now.'

That was sense, so I left her and got through to Ackie on the 'phone downstairs. That guy was full of it. He just didn't give me a chance to tell him where I was, but jumped into his story with both feet.

'Boy! You ain't seen anything' like this since the San Francisco fire!' he bawled. 'You gotta get into it quick. The lid's off an' hell's hoppin'. I got round to the Bureau and gave them the works, at first they thought I was tight but, knowing me, they finally decided they'd do somethin', so we all gumshoed along to the jail and had a look at Katz. Gee! That sergeant had certainly patted him around. Katz was in no state to crack wise. He just opened his mouth and kept it open. That guy spilled the dope so fast the G-men couldn't get it down quick enough. Then they took him outside. I guess no one thought of it except me, but I wasn't worrying my head. I stayed in the station until it was over. I wanted a story and by golly I was getting it. The G-men an' Katz no sooner got outside into the street than a couple of the boys opened up with a Thomson. Katz got a barrel of slugs and folded up an' one of the G-men caught it, then the other two started with their artillery an' there was a grand gun fight up an' down the street, with yours truly yellin' the news like a broadcast commentary down the 'phone to the press-room.

'I'm tellin' you, it was a grand five minutes. Anyway, that did it. The Federal Bureau got so mad that they raided Spencer's place, the Mackenzie Fabrics an' the Wensdy Wharf all at the same time. It was a grand clean-up. They've got 'em all. Spencer, Gus, the little fat guy, an' the whole mob of thugs. They got enough evidence that'll put that bunch away for fifty years, an' I've got the story. It'll be on the street in a couple of hours.'

I said, 'That's a grand bit of work. You kept me out of it?'

'Yeah, you didn't come in at all ... like you said. Listen, brother, I was mighty glad that Katz got his, otherwise he'd have pinned Blondie's killin' on you. I was scared sick that he'd bring it up right away, but maybe his own troubles tied up his memory.'

I stood, holding the 'phone, going a little cold. I'd forgotten that. Katz could have got me in a jam. I was glad he was dead, I never did have any use for that guy.

'Okay, Mo,' I said, 'I'm goin' back to bed. Listen, I've got Mardi, and we're keeping under cover for a bit. I'll watch the newspapers; when the trial's over, we'll come back. I ain't riskin' that baby gettin' drawn into it.'

'You keep out of it,' Ackie agreed. 'Give her my love, an' you look after her, you tramp – she's a grand girl.'

'You're tellin' me,' I said. ''Bye, pal, an' watch yourself,' and I hung up.

I ran upstairs and into the bedroom. Mardie was sitting up in bed, waiting for me. I could see something was wrong by the tense expression in her eyes. I didn't say anything about it, but began to get undressed.

'I've had a talk with Ackie,' I said, pulling off my shirt. 'He's crazy with excitement. The whole thing's blown up an' Spencer's in jail. Everyone's in jail, an' you an' I don't have to worry any more.'

She said, 'Is Lee Curtis in jail?'

I stopped, holding my trousers in one hand, and stared at her. 'Lee Curtis? Why worry about him? Ackie said they were all in jail.'

'But did he say Lee Curtis was in jail?' Her voice was almost hard.

I came over and sat on the bed. 'What makes you ask about him . . . more than the others?'

She looked at me in an odd way, and shook her head. 'I just wanted to know.'

There was something behind this, but I didn't want to press it. 'He didn't mention Curtis, but he's being taken care of, all right.'

'Oh,' she said in a flat voice, and looked at her finger-nails carefully. I sat on the bed, in my B.V.D.'s. I was beginning to feel like hell, but I couldn't get to sleep until I got this straightened.

'Tell me, baby,' I said gently.

She looked up at me, and her eyes were big and wild. 'Nick, do you love me?' she said. 'Do you really love me? Not just for yesterday and today, but for tomorrow and all the tomorrows?'

I put my hand over hers. 'You're everythin' to me, Mardi,' I said, and meant it.

She said, 'Will you do something big for me? Something that'll mean you love me?'

I nodded. 'Sure, what is it?'

'I want you and me to go away. Never come back to this State. To go south a long way, and start all over again – will you do that?'

'You mean never come back?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'But, Mardi, we've gotta live. My connections are here. I've lived here so long. I'm known here. I'll keep away with you until the trial is over, but if I've to earn enough dough it's here that I can earn it.'

She shook her head. 'Money doesn't matter. I have all we want.' She pulled a long envelope out of the bedclothes and put it into my hand. 'Look, it's for you.'

I opened the envelope blankly and shook out a bundle of bearer bonds. There were twenty thousand dollars. I pushed the bonds away from me and sat a little stunned, looking at her.

'They're mine,' she said fiercely. 'They're for you and me – with that, surely we can go away and you can start again.'

I said, 'But, Mardi, that's a lot of money for a girl to have. How did you get it?'

She said, 'At the Mackenzie Fabrics. I saved and I heard tips. Spencer invested for me—'

'I see.'

She began to cry. 'Say you'll take the money and come away with me, Nick – please. . . .'

I rolled into bed beside her, shoving the envelope under her pillow. 'Suppose we leave it until tomorrow? We'll be able to think clearly tomorrow,' I said.

I felt her stiffen. 'No,' she said, 'it must be now. I couldn't sleep. I must know. It's so important to me.'

'Why is it, Mardi? Why should you want to hide yourself away?'

'Nick, you'll lose me if you go back,' she said, suddenly sobbing violently. 'I can't tell you why, but I feel that is what will happen. You must say now.'

And because nothing really mattered to me except her happiness, and because I knew she loved me as much as I loved her, I gave her the promise.

She said, 'You really mean that?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'We'll take the car on and we'll go to the coast. We'll get us a small house somewhere near the sea with a garden and we'll be just you an' I.'

'And you'll be happy?'

'Sure, I'll be happy. I'll find something to do.' Lying there in the dark, I suddenly felt fine about the idea. We'd got money, we were going to the sun, and we had each other.

CHAPTER TWENTY

We got a place a few miles out from Santa Monica. It was small, but it was cute – the kind of place movie-stars week-end in. As soon as we saw it, we fell for it. The garden ran down to the sea, and if you wanted a bathe you just opened a gate in the wall and stepped on to the hot yellow sands. The sea was right ahead.

The house had two bedrooms and large sitting-room leading out to a piazza that encircled the whole building. The garden was big enough to screen the house from the road. The rent was high, but we didn't think twice about it – we took it.

Maybe I should have felt a heel taking all that money from Mardi, but I didn't. If the money had been mine, I should have wanted Mardi to share it with me. Well, the money was hers, and I wasn't going to spoil things by refusing to share with her.

We had a grand time fixing that house up. It took us a week to get straight, and we did all the work ourselves, even to fixing the carpets. When we got through, we were tickled to death with it.

Getting Mardi to the sea was a good thing. In a week or so it began to make a big difference to her. She lost the drawn, tense look that had begun to worry me, and she tanned mighty quick in the sunshine and sea air. She was happy and so was I. I reckon I never felt happier.

We got up every morning and had a bathe in the sea. It was grand swimming in that deep blue water, with no one to watch us – just the two of us, in the rolling swell of the sea. Mardi wore a white swim-suit that made her figure look better than it was, and that's saying something. She never bothered about wearing a cap, and we played around with each other without a care in the world.

Mardi said to me, a couple of weeks after we had settled down, 'Nick, you must start working.' I'd just come out of the sea, and was lying down on the sand, too lazy to dry myself, and letting the hot sunshine do it for me.

'That's okay with me,' I said. 'I'll look around and see what I can find.'

Mardi knelt over me, her knees and thighs buried in the soft sand and her hands crossed in her lap.

'Nick,' she said, 'I've been thinking. Why don't you write a book?'

I blinked up at her. 'Write a book?' I said. 'Why, hell – I couldn't write a book.'

She shook her head. 'You've never tried,' she said, which was true. 'Look how some novels sell. Why don't you try, and see what happens?'

'Yeah, but look how some flop. I guess novel-writing ain't so hot.'

She said, 'Why don't you write a novel about a newspaper man? Don't you think you could do that?'

There was an idea there. I sat up and thought about it. Ackie had enough background to fill three books, and I had had a few experiences. Mardi could see that I was looking at the idea favourably, and she began to get excited. 'Oh, Nick, wouldn't it be fun if you could. You wouldn't have to leave me then, would you? I could get your meals and sit around darning your socks, and you could be working—'

I grinned at her. 'Don't sound much fun for you,' I said, but she scrambled to her feet.

'You stay and think about it, Nick,' she said. 'I'll go back to the house and get the breakfast on. I'll call you.'

Well, I thought about it, and the more I thought the more I liked the idea. Before she called me, I was itching to make a start. I went back to the house, bolted my breakfast and got down to it. It took me all the morning to work out the general idea of the book, and when I was through it seemed pretty good to me.

I took it along to Mardi, who was in the kitchen, and explained the synopsis to her. She leant against the kitchen table, her eyes wide and bright with excitement, and was as enthusiastic about it as I was.

'Okay, honey,' I said when I had finished. 'The next move is to get a typewriter, and I'll make a start.'

It took me two months to get the book done, and if it hadn't been for Mardi it would never have been written. I got stuck half-way through and lost patience with it, but Mardi kept at me until I just had to go on. She was so excited that I hadn't the heart to fold up. When it was finished, and I read it through, I knew I had something. It wasn't going to be a best seller or anything like that, but it was good enough.

Mardi said, 'This is only the beginning; you're going to write more and more and you will very soon be famous.'

I grinned at her. 'Don't pin too much on this. Maybe it'll come back with the usual rejection slip.'

Mardi had faith. It didn't come back, it stuck. A couple of months after sending it off, I had a letter from the publishers in New York I had mailed it to, saying that they liked it and would I come on over and meet them.

I didn't expect to hear so soon, and we were right in the middle of painting the outside of the housse. Mardi insisted on my going, and she stayed behind to finish the work. I knew she'd be all right on her own. We'd been clear of the trial and things had settled down. Spencer and his gang had all caught pretty stiff raps, and although, at the time, Mardi was pretty het up, she'd forgotten about the business by now.

So I took the train west and left her. The publishers were mighty nice to me, offered me a very fair advance, and a contract for two more books. I wasn't going to waste time hanging around New York. Once I got their contract signed, I grabbed a taxi and made for Central Station. I found I'd got a couple of hours before I could make connections to Santa Monica, so I turned into the refreshment bar for a drink, before deciding where I'd go to pass the time. Standing at the bar was Colonel Kennedy.

He said, 'Well, this is a surprise.'

I took his hand. 'You're right,' I said. 'Colonel, this is a fine time to meet you. I've got a lot to thank you for.'

We ordered more drinks and made ourselves comfortable. 'What have you been doing all this time?' he asked, once we were settled.

'I'm living at Santa Monica now with my wife,' I said. 'You know, I've never thanked you enough for letting me have your lodge for a honeymoon.'

He grinned. 'That's all right, Nick,' he said. 'I'm glad I had it to lend you. Why live so far away? I guess I'd like to meet that wife of yours.'

'Well, what are you doing? Why not come on over for a week or so? We'd be glad to have you with us.'

He shook his head regretfully. 'I can't, I'm afraid. I've got commitments right now.'

I smiled. 'They're still falling for you, Colonel?' I said.

He nodded. 'I guess I haven't much to worry about,' he said.

I glanced at the clock. 'I've got almost two hours before I pull out,' I said. 'How about having lunch with me?'

He slid off the stool. 'Sure, I'd be glad to.'

Now that I had met up with him again, a sudden curiosity to file off the rough ends of the Spencer business seized me. When we got seated in a quiet little restaurant not far from the station and had given our order, I got the conversation round to the angle I wanted it to go.

'Colonel,' I said. 'You remember the Mackenzie Fabrics trial?'

He looked at me, and nodded. I wasn't sure, but I fancied he looked a little taken aback. 'Yes, I remember it – caused quite a sensation.'

'Yeah,' I said, 'I was in that business right up to my neck.'

'You were?'

'Yeah. I'd like to tell you about it, because I think you could finish the tale off for me.'

He shook his head. 'I don't know a thing about it,' he protested.

'Wait a minute, Colonel,' I said. 'Maybe I can jog your memory.'

I took him carefully through the whole story, and he sat there, his lunch forgotten. When I had finished with the death of Blondie, and how Mardi and I had quietly slipped away to Santa Monica, he sat back and gently blew his cheeks out. 'Well, I'll be damned,' he said. 'That's some yarn. I can't see where I come in, for all that.'

This is where it was going to be a little tricky. 'You remember when the newspaper boys had you bottled up at the lodge with a girl friend, Colonel?' I said.

He frowned. 'Now I don't want to go into that,' he said abruptly.

'The girl friend was the woman on the telephone,' I told him quietly. 'I want to know who she was.'

He shook his head. 'You've made a mistake.'

'I'm givin' you this straight. I heard her voice, and that was enough for me. I'd know that voice anywhere.'

'I can't discuss this any further, Nick. I'm sorry.'

I said, 'Listen, Colonel. I've got a right to know. That dame might have caused me a lotta grief. The trial's over, and the whole thing's washed up. You know me well enough to know that I won't use any information you give me. It's just that it is an unsatisfactory ending – not knowing.'

He sat brooding. 'I guess maybe you have a right,' he said with a little smile. 'I wouldn't tell it to any other man, but you've done a lot for me.'

He was just saving his conscience, but that didn't worry me.

'Thank you, Colonel; it'll go no further.'

He hummed and hawed a bit, then said, 'I don't know who she was – that's the truth. She came out to see me, representing a fellow named Lee Curtis. This fellow was associated with the Mackenzie Fabrics Co. and I had just put in for a bundle of their stock. This girl was authorized by Curtis to make me an offer for them. She was a devilish pretty woman, and I asked her to stay to dinner while we discussed the matter. I was curious to know why Curtis, who was the secretary of the place, should want to get hold of such a large block.'

'How much was it?' I asked.

Kennedy shrugged. 'I forget now, I think it was about ten thousand dollars – something like that. Anyway, we had dinner. All the time, she refused to give me her name, but kept on selling me the idea of parting with the stock. She had some story which didn't convince me, but in the end I decided to negotiate. Curtis was offering a high percentage on the stock, and I thought it might be worth while.'

'You mean, you don't know who she was?' I said, disappointed.

'No – I don't. The rest of the story doesn't reflect to my glory, but you may as well have it. Once the business part was over, and she gave me Curtis's cheque, I thought we might get a little more friendly. I did tell you that she was a remarkably pretty woman?'

I nodded a little grimly. 'Yeah – you mentioned it.'

'Well, she got a little scared and pulled a gun. I was never so astonished in my life. I tried to take the damn' thing away from her, and it went off. The rest of the story you know.'

I sat back. 'Well, that don't get me very far,' I said. 'I was hoping to tie that dame down.'

Kennedy glanced at the clock. 'You'll have to be on the move or you'll lose your train.'

I beckoned the waiter for the bill. Kennedy said hastily, 'I'll pay that.'

I shook my head. 'I've just sold a book, Colonel. I guess it's a nice experience to buy a guy, with all the dough you've got, a lunch.'

Kennedy laughed. 'I'm glad you've settled down, Nick. But you're not to hide yourself away. You must bring your wife up to town.'

I took out my wallet and found a ten-dollar bill which I gave to the waiter. A photo of Mardi was amongst my papers, and I flipped it across to Kennedy. 'That's my wife, Kennedy – you'll think she's a grand girl when you meet her.'

I took the change from the waiter and gave him a buck for himself. Then I turned to see what Kennedy was making of Mardi. He was sitting staring at me, his face a little white and his eyes like granite.

I said, 'What's wrong?'

He said in a hard voice, 'What's the idea, Mason?'

I stared at him. 'You gone screwy, Colonel?'

He tapped Mardi's photograph. 'If you knew about this girl, why ask me?'

I sat for a full minute, staring at him. Then I said, 'That's my wife, Colonel – I don't know what you're gettin' at.'

'That's the woman Curtis sent to me to negotiate the stock I was telling you about.'

I pushed back my chair. 'You've made a mistake,' I said unsteadily. 'That's Mardi – my wife.'

He picked up the photograph and looked at it carefully. All the time he was doing that, my heart was beating against my ribs like a pile driver. Then he looked up. 'Who was your wife before she married you, Nick?' he said.

With the sudden horrible feeling of things crumbling, I said, 'She was Spencer's secretary.'

Kennedy pushed the photograph across the table towards me. 'It fits, doesn't it?' he said quietly. 'There's no doubt about it, Nick.'

I just sat there in a heap. Kennedy wasn't the kind of guy who made mistakes. I said unevenly, 'But this is crazy.'

He got to his feet. 'Suppose we leave it, Nick? I've got to run along. I'll be seeing you.' He put his hand on my shoulder for a moment, then walked out of the restaurant. I picked up the photograph and put it in my wallet. I couldn't think. I didn't want to think. I got up, pushing the chair away from me with the back of my legs and walked over to the hat rack. I put my hat and coat on slowly. The waiters were looking at me curiously, but I didn't care about them; then I went outside into the street.

The train to Santa Monica was already in the station and I got a seat. I settled myself and looked out of the window. My eyes didn't see anything, and although it was a hot day I felt cold.

The train began to glide out of the station, taking me back to Santa Monica – and to something I was frightened to face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BY the time I had reached Santa Monica I had got over the shock. The explanation must be simple, I told myself. Either Kennedy had made a big mistake, or else Mardi had been forced to play some deep game by Curtis. Whatever the explanation was, it wasn't going to break up Mardi's life with me. I'd spent a lot of time playing around with girls, and I knew when I had found the right one. Mardi was my girl. I wasn't going to let anything come between us. I'd talk the whole thing over with her, and she'd tell me the truth. The truth wasn't going to be bad – it mustn't be bad.

I took a taxi from Santa Monica station. I wanted to get back there fast. It seemed a long way, and I sat on the edge of my seat urging the driver to push his cab along. I got there at last. The front door was standing open, but Mardi wasn't in the garden. I walked up the long path, feeling suddenly a little sick. I kept on telling myself that it would be all right, but somehow at the back of my brain I knew that what I had built up was already crumbling.

I stepped into the hallway. A man's hat and coat hung on the rack – they weren't mine. I put my grip carefully on the floor and stood looking. Then I got rid of my own hat and coat and walked into the sitting-room.

They were there waiting for me.

For a moment, I didn't recognize him. He was a tall guy, with a lot of wavy hair, a tanned complexion and bright blue eyes. It was Lee Curtis, all right. I stood in the doorway, with the blood roaring in my ears. I looked at Mardi. She was sitting listlessly in an armchair. Her face was white and her eyes looked like big holes cut in a sheet. She didn't even look at me.

Curtis said, 'I've been waiting for you.'

I couldn't say anything.

'I've been here four days – she an' I've been living together.'

I felt suddenly brittle inside, like someone had stepped in close with a half-arm jab, but still I couldn't think of anything to say.

He looked at me thoughtfully, then he put his hand up to his chin. I could hear his nails rasp on his beard. He said, 'Take it easy – it's no use gettin' rattled.'

I walked with stiff legs over to Mardi. I said, 'I'm with you all the way – but I've got to know the truth.'

She didn't look up. She just sat there as if I hadn't spoken.

Curtis turned on his heels, so that he was facing me. He said, 'I've been waiting for this, for some time. Now I've got you both where I want you.'

I turned my head and looked at him. I guess I must have had a flicker in my eye, because he jerked a gun out of his hip pocket. 'Take it easy,' he said. 'I don't want to start shootin', but I'm not risking anythin' from you.'

I said between my teeth, 'Talk quick an' get out.'

He sat on the edge of the table, still holding the gun levelled at me. 'It's quite a tale,' he said, with a sneer. 'Sit down – you'll get tired.'

I didn't move.

'A couple of years ago,' he said, swinging his leg slowly to and fro, 'I got a job with the Mackenzie Fabrics Corporation as their secretary. She worked for Spencer – you know that. She also lived with Spencer – maybe you didn't know that.' He stopped talking and fumbled for a cigarette, but not once did he take his eyes off me. 'I soon found that there was something going on behind the scenes, and finally Spencer took me into his confidence. I saw the set-up was big – very big, and I wasn't getting much out of it. Nor was she. So we got together. We thought if we could pin Richmond's murder on Spencer, and get him out of the way, I could take over, and have some of the profits. So we picked on you. We wanted a guy who would bust the Vessi frame-up wide open, and we decided you could do it. She contacted you on the 'phone – quite smart the way she can change her voice. She wasn't living with Spencer any more – she was living with me.'

I said, 'You can stop talkin'. I don't want to hear any more. Get out!'

He grinned. 'You don't know the half of it yet, smart boy,' he said. 'I'm only gettin' started. She's a romantic little thing, and

I guess she fell for you – fell for you hard. Then she tried to double-cross Spencer, who fired her out. I tagged along behind her, because I wasn't sure if she'd try and double-cross me. Just when she was set, Blondie turned up. Now Blondie knew all about her. She knew she had lived with Spencer, and she knew she'd lived with me. Blondie wanted some easy dough, so she tried blackmail. You took yourself to town and left our little friend at the lodge. Blondie had been watching, and she called on her as soon as you were out of the way. Blondie didn't know what she was up against. Mardi shot her. Do you hear that, you big pushover, your girl friend shot Blondie. Now you know why she was so scared. Now you know why she wouldn't stay in town, but beat it across all these States, until she was sitting on the edge of the Pacific. She wasn't content at murder, she double-crossed me. As soon as she knew that Blondie was dead, she came to my place and took twenty thousand dollars of bonds out of my safe. I told you she had lived with me, didn't I? Well, she knew all about my safe an' how to get into it. So she knocked off all I had and beat it with you.

'The Feds. nearly got me, but they didn't. I've been hunting her for months, and I found her just after you left for New York. Well, I guess she's had to pay for her double-cross.'

I said, 'Mardi, don't worry – I'm still with you.'

She put her hands over her eyes and shuddered.

Curtis tossed the butt on the floor. 'So you're still with her – are you?' he sneered. 'You still think you're goin' to live around with a chippie whose sideline's murder, huh? You can forget it! You won't want her around any more.'

I said, 'Now you're through – get out!'

He raised his eyebrows. 'Who said I'm through? That's a laugh. Listen, punk, I want dough. I've got enough on that judy to fry her. Okay, I ain't working any more. I'm living on you. You're going to give me plenty of dough, and when I've spent that I'll come and ask for more. So you're going to be busy earning it.'

I sat down quietly. I knew that this guy had got us. There wasn't going to be any more happy days. There wasn't going to be any more swims in the sea, or any more of anything. This guy would be with us until he died. My brain lurched a little. *Until he died.* I looked at him thoughtfully. One against two. One life making two lives unhappy. It didn't add up. I felt slightly sick, but there was no other way out of it – I'd gotta kill this guy.

I said in a quiet voice, 'How much do you want?'

'What can you afford?' He looked over at Mardi, then back at me. I knew he was playing with us.

'Fifty bucks a week,' I said, for something to say. I knew he'd got a figure, so I wanted to get to it quick.

He laughed. 'I want fifteen grand now, and a hundred bucks a week until I get tired of asking for it.'

So that was that.

I got to my feet slowly. 'You're crazy,' I said. 'We ain't got fifteen grand.'

He shrugged. 'You had twenty grand from me. You've got half of it salted away. You can sell the house and the furniture. She's got some trinkets – you've got a few things around that'll fetch something. You'll make it up all right.'

'So you're stripping us clean.'

He nodded. 'Sure – ain't she worth it to you?'

I wandered over to the window and looked out. 'The Feds are after you, too,' I said. 'Suppose I turn you over to 'em?'

'Be your age. She'll go with me – and it's the hot squat for her.'

I was just wasting time. Somehow I'd got to get his gun and kill him. I was surprised how calmly I was setting about this. Once I had made up my mind that he'd have to go, I felt no more misgivings than if I'd planned to tread on an ant. I'd just got to make the opportunity.

'Well, if it's like that,' I said, 'I'll have to go ahead. I can't give you the dough now.'

He said, 'Write me a cheque for ten grand. That'll do to go on with – I'll be round for the rest of the dough in a month.'

I began to look dejected, but I was acting all the time. I slouched from the window, and headed for the writing-desk. He still sat on the table, watching me. I stopped at the other end of the table and rested my hands on the table-top.

'Listen, Curtis,' I said, 'give us a break – won't you? Take the ten grand an' call it quits.'

He laughed. Just for a second his eyes were off me and I acted. I grabbed the table and heaved. It was easy. He was sitting on the far end and it flew up with a crash. I flung my weight on the table so that it toppled over on top of him, pinning him flat. His gun shot out of his hand.

Kneeling on the table, and keeping him flat, I said to Mardi, 'Get the gun quick.'

She reached forward and picked it up.

'Give it to me.'

She turned and looked at me. She could see in my eyes what I was going to do. Instead of giving me the gun, she stepped away.

I said desperately, 'Honey, give me the gun.'

'No – you're not going to kill him,' she said fiercely. 'I won't have you kill anyone.'

'For Pete's sake – can't you see? It's the only thing to do. We've gotta get out of this somehow. If this rat lives we're finished – give me the gun.'

All this time, Curtis was lying on his back, with his head just appearing above the edge of the table. His eyes were bolting out of his head, and his skin was green.

Mardi said, 'Nick – I wouldn't have killed her. But she wanted to smash up the only decent thing I'd ever had. Your love for me. I was mad to have done it, but I wanted you so much. I tried to forget, but it's always been with me—'

I said, 'I'm going through with this – give me the gun.'

'I tried to save our love by killing someone, but it didn't work out that way. You want to do it too. We could never face each other. Let him go, Nick.'

She was right. I stepped off the table and stood away. Curtis got to his feet slowly, his face twitching.

Mardi said, 'Wait here. I'll get you the cheque.'

I turned my back on Curtis. I just couldn't bring myself to look at him. Mardi touched my hand as she went past me. 'It'll work out all right, Nick – if you can still love me,' she said.

I turned, but she had already run out of the room, across to her bedroom, where I knew she kept her cheque-book.

Curtis said, 'By Heck! You try any more tricks—'

From Mardi's room came the sound of a revolver shot. The sharp crack of the gun made both of us start forward. Then we stopped and looked at each other.

Curtis drew his lips off his teeth. 'So she's double-crossed me again,' he said.

He stood hesitating, then he walked into the bedroom. I didn't move. From where I stood I could see him looking into the room. I could see a sudden shiver run through him, and he turned away and came into the hallway. He didn't look at me. He stood, thinking. Then he walked to the front door and went down the long path. I could hear him walking on the gravel, but I didn't watch him go.

When he had gone, I went out into the garden. I went down to the sea, and stood looking at the blue rollers. I didn't want to look at Mardi now. I wanted to remember her as I had known her. I wanted to see her as she had always been. I could not weep for her, because everything had dried up inside me. A big seagull suddenly flew over my head and circled round me. Then, as if startled by my stillness, it sped, like a departing spirit, swiftly out to sea.

THE END

Over the phone, her voice was metallic. And she had offered journalist Nick Mason a hefty sum to expose a murder frame up... Mason, intrigued, had gone along to the gas chamber to see Vessi die. Before the pellets hit the acid, Vessi insisted on his innocence. His last words gave Mason the clue to some odd business going on at the respectable Mackenzie Fabric Corporation. When he was warned off his investigations by a blonde fury of a hooker and a cold-eyed gunman, Mason almost decided to forget the whole thing... but by then he'd met the irresistible Mardi, the girl from Mackenzie Fabrics who might be able to lead him to the truth...

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